Perceptions of public relations: key communicators share their opinions

Kamali A. Brooks
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ABSTRACT

Kamali A. Brooks
Perceptions of Public Relations: Key Communicators Share Their Opinions
2003
Thesis Advisor: Dr. Donald Bagin
Master of Arts in Public Relations

This study had three main purposes: first, determine how key communicators (those who talk to many people on a daily basis and share their opinions with others) in today’s society feel about the public relations field; second, show that positive public relations does take place; and third, change the negative perceptions society holds for public relations, so that public relations will lose its negative image.

The author used many sources to obtain research for this thesis, including Rowan University’s on-line databases, the University of Delaware’s on-line databases, Internet searches, the Rowan catalogue, DELCAT and Temple University.

The author collected data from 25 surveys, which were administered to key communicators throughout Delaware, New Jersey and Philadelphia.

From the survey results, the author concluded that most of the key communicators had positive perceptions about public relations. More importantly, they felt that public relations is very valuable. The respondents felt that Tylenol practiced good public relations and acted in an ethical manner. After reading the Tylenol case, the respondents had more positive perceptions of public relations than they did before reading the Tylenol case.
MINI ABSTRACT

Kamali A. Brooks
Perceptions of Public Relations: Key Communicators Share Their Opinions
2003
Thesis Advisor: Dr. Donald Bagin
Master of Arts in Public Relations

This study determined how key communicators perceive public relations. Key communicators are those who talk to many people on a daily basis, and share their opinions with others.

Most of the key communicators surveyed had positive perceptions about public relations. They felt that public relations is very valuable. The respondents understood that Tylenol practiced good public relations and acted in an ethical manner. After reading the Tylenol case, the respondents had a more positive perception of public relations than they did before reading the Tylenol case.
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Chapter One

BACKGROUND, NEED, PURPOSE, PROCEDURES, LIMITATIONS, AND DEFINITIONS

Background

According to the article “Public Relations: Priorities in the Real Economy” by David Drobis, public relations is among the top five fastest-growing professions in the United States. Consequently, public relations firms are hiring new public relations practitioners to expand their capabilities and practices.\(^1\) Despite the field’s growth, society holds a negative perception of public relations. The perceived credibility of the field continues to dwindle. Public relations practitioner and author of the article “Ethics and PR,” Harvey Thomas said, “Our profession has lost a lot of its reputation over the last few years.”\(^2\)

Even though public relations does not have a set definition, people who work in the profession could describe it as a management function based on sound organizational

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performance, using two-way communication to create and maintain goodwill amongst publics. This defines positive public relations. Some people outside the profession, however, would define public relations negatively. Rather than “use two-way communication to create and maintain goodwill amongst publics,” some people believe that PR practitioners spin information to make their organization look better. Others believe that public relations is a deceitful profession. And that practitioners perform only in their organizations best interest, not in the best interest of their publics.

“When confronted with the Watergate story, President Nixon is reputed to have said: ‘Let’s PR it!’...In Britain, Lawrence Norcross, writing in the Daily Telegraph, commenting on the drop in standards at a school wrote: ‘Parents collectively are not idiots: They cannot be fooled for two decades by propaganda and PR.’ Again in Britain, the Consumers’ Association has described the citizens’ railway charter as ‘a glossy public relations con.’”

British Prime Minister Wilson described public relations as “the art of lying.”

In a television discussion on ethics and morality, one of the panelists asked Thomas “How can you talk about ethics when you’ve spent a career in public relations being a professional liar?”

In the article “Society and Corporate Public Relations – Why the Conflict?” by Augustine Ihator, public relations practitioner Craig Miyamoto of Miyamoto Strategies Counsel made a similar comment on how society perceives public relations practices.

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4 Malinson, p. 15.
5 Thomas, p. 309.
“The general public either don’t know or care about us, or they think we’re lying, manipulating, stunt-happy spin doctors and masters of exaggeration and hyperbole.”

These negative remarks describe negative public relations. But to some, “negative public relations” is the only kind of public relations that exists.

*Toxic Sludge is Good for You!: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry*, by John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton supports society’s misconceptions of the public relations field. “The book names names and reveals how public relations wizards concoct and spin the news, organize phony ‘grassroots’ front groups, spy on citizens, and conspire with lobbyists and politicians to thwart democracy.”

*Toxic Sludge is Good for You!* adds to the negative reputation public relations continues to hold.

**Need for Study**

The public holds negative perceptions of public relations. According to Thomas, the profession just recently started to gain a bad image “partly because of the glossy and sometimes blatantly false hype that is seen up-front in today’s public relations.”

Through research, the researcher found that many positives perceptions of public relations also exist. This study was an attempt to learn society’s mixed perceptions of public relations through surveying key communicators; to change negative perceptions of public relations; and to rid public relations of its negative image. Public relations is a

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8 Thomas p. 309.
credible field and society should understand what public practitioners do. A few bad apples should not corrupt the field as a whole.

Purpose

This study has three main purposes. The first purpose is to determine how key communicators in today’s society feel about the public relations field. The second purpose is to show that positive public relations does take place. The third purpose of this study is to change the negative perceptions society holds for public relations, so that public relations will lose its negative image.

Procedures

The researcher developed a survey to determine how key communicators perceive public relations. The 11-question survey consisted of open-ended questions, close-ended questions, semantic differential scales, demographic questions and a short case about the Tylenol cyanide crisis.

The researcher administered the survey to 25 “key communicators” – those who talk to many people on a daily basis, and share their opinions with others. Through talking to people, the researcher identified numerous key communicators. The key communicators who completed the survey included people from various backgrounds and occupations. Political science experts, politicians, business experts, biology experts, journalists, religious figures, barbers, beauticians and union leaders were among those surveyed.
The survey was administered between January 2003 and June 2003. It was not given to all the key communicators on the same day or at the same time. The survey was conducted in a variety of ways. The researcher contacted key communicators by e-mail, telephone and in person to ask if they would complete the survey. The researcher then arranged times to give each key communicator the survey, and a time to pick up the completed survey. The researcher also asked others to administer surveys.

Limitations

There was not much secondary research on the public's perceptions of public relations. The researcher was only able to find one research study pertaining to this topic. The sample size was small. It only consisted of 25 people. The sample was not randomly picked. Therefore, the results do not represent the entire population.

Definitions

- Negative public relations – public relations practices society considers to be unethical.
- Positive public relations – public relations practices society considers to be ethical.
- NSPRA – National School Public Relations Association
- PRSA – Public Relations Society of America
- Credibility – the quality of being believable or trustworthy.
- Spin – a way of presenting news tailored to reflect well, or at least less badly, on oneself; given a factually dubious twist beneficial to the originator.
- Perception of public relations – the beliefs society holds about public relations. In this study, perceptions are considered negative or positive.

- Ethics – the code of morals used by a person, group of people or organization.

- Sludge – deceitful information.

- Profession – a set of norm-govern practices grounded in a relationship of trust between professional clients who lack a specific genuine good.

- Ethical practices – practices that maintain a client’s trust.

- Flacks – negative nickname given to public relations practitioners

- Public relations image – the reputation public relations has in society.
Chapter Two

LITERATURE REVIEW

Positive Perceptions of Public Relations

People-Focused

In *Careers in Public Relations: Opportunities in a Dynamic Industry*, a publication released by the Council of Public Relations Firms, it says that public relations practitioners are people-focused. They are curious about what motivates human behavior and they like to build positive relationships.\(^9\)

Issues-Oriented

Practitioners focus on the issues at hand. “Public relations professionals craft and execute campaigns for social issues like the war on drugs and smoking, and they help organizations take positions that are unpopular with some audiences.”\(^{10}\)

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\(^9\) The Council of Public Relations Firms.

\(^{10}\) The Council of Public Relations Firms.
Exhibits Strong Character

“Public relations professionals are often the company’s face to the outside world. Because their character becomes the most visible representation of their organizations’ values and credibility, their integrity must be unquestioned. Always in the probing eye of the media, they have personal courage to tell the truth, to avoid spin and evasiveness.”\(^1\)

Business-Oriented

Public relations practitioners possess business skills. “At public relations firms, virtually every professional is an entrepreneur. While you serve your clients, your time and efforts represent revenue for the firm; when you serve them well, you inevitably create new revenue sources from pleased clients.”\(^2\)

Builds Brands

According to Drobis, public relations is a growing profession.\(^3\) Companies are looking to public relations professionals to promote their businesses. According to the book *The Fall of Advertising & the Rise of PR* by Al and Laura Ries, public relations is important because it not only lowers advertising costs, it also builds brands. Other experts agree:

\(^1\) The Council of Public Relations Firms.
\(^2\) The Council of Public Relations Firms.
\(^3\) Drobis, p. 15.
- “World-class companies reveal that public relations is a critical component to creating a strong brand image, according to a recent study from Best Practices, LLC.”¹⁴

- “Public relations is considered a vital component for building brand value, maintaining brand vitality, and establishing brand credibility according to a national poll of brand managers released today by M Booth & Associates, a national public relations firm.”¹⁵

At one time, advertising was used to introduce a new product. “But in the past few years, more and more big businesses have chosen public relations instead.”¹⁶ It also “has made such headway in corporate America that many advertising agencies have either aligned themselves with PR firms or have integrated public relations experts into their own staffs.”¹⁷

Many products have become well known through public relations practices. Botox did $300-million in sales in 2001 without using advertising. “The brand got built by PR.”¹⁸ Now that the brand is established, Botox uses advertising. Viagra and Sony Playstation did the same thing. The Body Shop, on the other hand, uses only public relations for brand recognition.¹⁹

¹⁴ PR Strategies that Strengthen Brand Images, PR Newswire.
¹⁷ Drobis, p. 15.
¹⁹ Smallbridge, p. FP16.
Cost Effective

Public relations is a cost-effective way to gain publicity as opposed to advertising. "While it takes more time to catch fire than advertising, PR is seen as a more grass-roots effort – more one-on-one with the consumer. It often uses the media to help create a buzz, which increases a product's credibility." ²⁰

Establishes Trust by Providing Factual Information

According to Ronald N. Levy, truth – "facts that fill a public information gap or that give the public a clearer look at reality"²¹ – is the ultimate public relations weapon. "Some truths that brilliant PR teams have used include: 1.) Showing that they are a company that can be trusted and 2.) Creating victories over fear with facts."²²

Ketchum, a world-wide public relations firm, has established trust with the publics of Johnson & Johnson. Ketchum sends informational releases to America's 10,000 newspapers providing potential customers with information on products. They offer truthful and factual information, keeping in mind that customers buy from companies they trust.

Providing truthful and factual information is exemplified during the Tylenol cyanide case. In 1982, Johnson & Johnson, along with its subsidiary Tylenol, maintained a trusting relationship with its customers, by giving them truthful information after someone contaminated Tylenol packages with cyanide, killing seven people. At the

²⁰ Strafford.
²² Levy, p. 22.
outbreak of the crisis, Johnson & Johnson immediately pulled over $100 million worth of
Tylenol products off shelves nationwide.

Throughout the next several days, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA)
worked with Tylenol to provide the public with a continuous flow of information about
the incident. The FDA developed a standard tamper-proof package and required
nonprescription drug manufacturers to use it.

Johnson & Johnson put its credo, “For this we stand,” on display for the world to
see. The CEO and company spokespeople sustained leadership roles and authority.
Tylenol continuously updated the public with new information, whether it was good or
bad. Tylenol gladly accepted the public’s input.

A large campaign, including a 30-city teleconference, reintroduced Tylenol to the
market. Johnson & Johnson shipped Tylenol back to stores in new tamper-proof
containers. Consumers who had thrown out their Tylenol received a free package.
Despite the tragedy, Tylenol captured over 70 percent of the market share – more than
they had before the crisis – because of their efforts to provide factual information to its
publics.

Aware that the public had unfounded fears about chlorine and that the fears would
worsen unless the public knew the truth, the chlorine industry called upon Goddard
Claussen to provide the public with factual information about chlorine. They gave
truthful information on how chlorine protects our lives and health. “Firms like Goddard
Claussen use the ultimate weapon of PR to create victories of facts over fears.”

23 Levy, p. 22.
In another effort to inform the public, the American Hotel & Motel Association called upon Savvy PR when hotel business was down. Savvy PR found that people were not coming to hotels because they did not know the proper way to deal with them. They were unaware of “how to make a reservation, what to say at the front desk, how much to tip the bellman and how to find out (without embarrassingly seeming ignorant) what’s included.”

Savvy PR developed a series of news releases informing people on what to do in these situations.

“When PR services are delivered with sincerity, thoughtfulness and energy by a PR consultancy that really knows what it is doing and has extensive experience in the profession, the results speak for themselves.”

They are able to establish trust with publics. Building trust with publics is an important component of public relations.

Assists Reporters

Maria Trombly, author of the article “Avoiding the Spin Cycle,” says that a relationship with public relations practitioners is useful when used correctly; therefore, a positive relationship can exist between public relations professionals and reporters. “The most valuable gifts PR agents make to reporters are the story ideas themselves.”

Not only do public relations professionals provide the public with information, but they provide reporters with information, too. A reporter for the Belleville News Democrat in Illinois, Elizabeth Donald said, “Sometimes you’re bound to your

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24 Levy, p. 22.
desk... Then it's very valuable to hear from PR people because it's the only way to find out what's going on.”

Reporters must deal with public relations people everyday. Despite the ongoing disdain between the two fields, if done appropriately, public relations can enhance the reporter's coverage. President of the Society of Professional Journalists, a political writer and a columnist at the Louisville Courier-Journal, Al Cross said that “working with good PR people could help a story because they know how to make the case for their side in an understandable way.”

Serves as a Management Function

Public relations professionals “manage the movement of messages into the organization, for example, when conducting research on the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of publics and then using that information to counsel management on organizational policies or actions. They may manage the movement of a message out of the organization when they help management decide how to explain a policy or action to the public and then write a news story or fact sheet to explain the policy or action.”

Public relations is also a management function in that practitioners report to the CEO of a company. “This person can oversee communication in times of crisis. More importantly, he or she can monitor communication through surveys and focus groups and

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27 Trombly, p. 18.
28 Trombly, p. 18.
guide the organization into productive relationships with its internal and external publics.  

Negative Perceptions of Public Relations

Public relations continues to possess a negative image. The public’s perception of PR is not improving. “It’s a year since I wrote in Creative Business about the parlous state of the PR industry,” said writer Chris Lewis in his article entitled, One Year Later, Zero Progress PR Has Done Nothing to Enhance its Image in the Past 12 Months. “Sadly, little has improved.”

Spins Information

Public relations practitioners are otherwise known as name “spin doctors.”

Thomas Madden’s book, Spin Man: the topsy-turvy world of public relations – a tell-all tale, gives a definition of spin – “a PR person’s or Spin Doctor’s tools of trade.” In an article written on schools budget cuts, several people voiced their opinion on supervisors hiring public relations people to work for the schools. “Premier Ernie Eves came under fire in the Legislature for allowing supervisors in taken-over school boards to spend thousands of dollars on ‘spin doctors.’” In the same article, NPD Leader Howard


Hampton, said, "Your supervisors in Ottawa, Hamilton and Toronto are going to take money out of their school budgets to hire spin doctors, public relations, propaganda consultants." Hampton continues on to call public relations people propaganda artists.

In "Spin Timidity: Why the PR Industry is in a Mess," author and respected public relations guru Roger Haywood speaks out against his own industry. "Few sit on the board; more often, they are down the corridor, issuing manipulated news stories."35

While trying to demystify public relations myths, Doris Iim talks about the public's perception of public relations. According to Iim, the public holds the misconstrued image that public relations spins bad news to make it seem better. "To many, it's all about press conferences, sugar-coating bad news to make it more palatable..."36

Sid McKeen, author of the article "Fluffy Flackery Makes Many Public Relations Moves," says that public relations does spin and that he enjoys it. "I've always been entertained by the great spin the public relations people are able to put on their pitches."37

Untruthful

Many find it hard to trust public relations professionals. The 1950s movie, The Sweet Smell of Success, represents the stereotypical deceitful public relations person.

"Tony Curtis plays public relations man Sidney Falco, who does whatever it takes to gain

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34 Boyle, p. A06.


power and money for himself and his clients. The part is a paradigm for the slimy stereotype some PR people bear." In the movie, Falco’s client says, “It’s a publicity man’s nature to be a liar. I wouldn’t hire you if you wasn’t a liar.” One journalist at a national business publication said that public relations people “lie and put up roadblocks to access executives.”

Flacks

The title of McKeen’s article says it all: “Fluffy Flackery Makes Many Public Relations Moves.” As a young man, McKeen took a job as a newspaper reporter. “I quickly gave up all thoughts of the bigger paychecks being offered in those days to my counterparts in the flackery business.”

The article “Inside Moves” by Kristin Zhivago says, “PR firms have a scam where the flack promises to make the client rich and famous, and then proceeds to make himself rich and famous. Meanwhile, the client draws just enough attention to his product to get competitors interested. They watch; they learn; then they eat the client’s lunch.”

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39 Choleska, p.69

40 Choleska, p.69

41 Sid McKeen, p. C4.

Peter Verburg says that public relations practitioners are flacks who waste journalists’ time and corporations’ money. “Everyday, PR flacks bombard journalists with e-mails, faxes and envelopes, most of it loaded with incomprehensible jargon. Think of all the corporate profits that are wasted on lame publicity campaigns.” Journalists call the incomprehensible jargon ‘bumf,’ which is short for bum fodder, the British slang for toilet paper. “If corporate PR material really could be used as toilet paper, I’d never have to buy another roll.”

Whack-a-flack, is an Internet game “that invites journalists and tech marketers to ‘whack’ public relations firms with paper airplanes.” PR agency Sterling Hager developed Whack-a-flack for the Internet-based company, e-traction. The game’s purpose is to grab print journalists’ attention. Even though it was designed for public relations, the name of the game plays on the true perceptions people hold of public relations, ‘flacks.’

Untrustworthy

The public often has a hard time trusting public relations professionals. They view the profession with suspicion. “Public relations people are rated below politicians and journalists in terms of public trust.” Research shows that public relations is not validated; the methodologies practitioners use are considered suspect.

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44 Verburg, p.88.
46 Haywood, R. (2002, March 7). PR should have good ideas, but Integrity is Vital. Marketing.
Chapter Three

PROCEDURES

The researcher used many sources to obtain research for this thesis, including Rowan University’s on-line databases, the University of Delaware’s on-line databases, Internet searches, the Rowan catalogue, DELCAT and Temple University.

Literature Review

Rowan University and the University of Delaware offered several databases needed to begin researching for this thesis. ABI/Inform, Lexus-Nexus and ERIC were searched for relevant information. The terms used to gather research were “public relations self image,” “image of public relations,” “perception of public relations,” “public relations crises,” “public relations evaluation,” “public relations strengths,” “public relations weaknesses,” “public relations and crisis management,” “public relations and public opinion,” “public relations research,” “public relations and statistical data,” “public relations studies,” “public relations and credibility studies,” “public relations and spin,” “public relations and sludge,” “public relations case studies,” “public relations ethics” and “public relations and perception.” This search produced approximately 17 relevant articles and books.

The researcher searched the Rowan University on-line catalogue, which did not produce any books. A search on DELCAT, the University of Delaware on-line catalogue, produced about eight books. Approximately four books were obtained through Rowan University's Inter-library loan office. Borrowed books were sent from Florida A&M University, Hamilton Township Public Library and Camden County College.

The researcher conducted an Internet search using Excite.com, PRSA.org, NSPRA.org, Temple.edu, Whack-a-flack.com, and IABC.org. The researcher used the same key terms as previously stated to search these websites.

Primary Research

The researcher developed a survey to determine how key communicators perceive public relations (A copy of the survey can be found in Appendix A at the end of this thesis). The 11-question survey consisted of open-ended questions, close-ended questions, semantic differential scales, demographic questions and a short case about the Tylenol cyanide crisis.

The survey was administered to 25 “key communicators.” Key communicators are defined as those who talk to many people on a daily basis, and share his or her opinions with others. Through talking to others, the researcher was able to identify numerous key communicators. The key communicators who completed the survey included people from various backgrounds and occupations. Political science experts, politicians, business experts, biology experts, journalists, religious figures, barbers, beauticians and union leaders were among those surveyed.
It was administered between January 2003 and June 2003. It was not given to all the key communicators on the same day or at the same time. The survey was conducted in a variety of ways. The researcher contacted key communicators by e-mail, telephone and in person to ask if they would complete the survey (A copy of the e-mail letter can be found in Appendix B). The researcher then arranged times to give each key communicator the survey, and a time to pick up the completed survey. Some of the survey participants completed the survey through email. The researcher also asked others to administer surveys.

Next, data from the 25 surveys was calculated to determine how key communicators in today's society perceive public relations. The researcher then drew conclusions about key communicators' perceptions based on the survey results.
Chapter Four

FINDINGS

The survey used in this study was given to determine how “key communicators” perceive public relations. Key communicators are those who speak to many people on a daily basis and share their opinions with others. The survey comprised 11 questions. One of the questions was open-ended, two questions used semantic differential scales, five questions were multiple choice and three questions were demographic. A total of 25 people completed the survey.

The first question on the survey asked respondents to tell what they think the purpose of public relations is. All of the key communicators who participated in this study have similar perceptions about the purpose of public relations.
Question 1: What do you think is the purpose of public relations?

- "To strike a balance between the interests of the entity, be it government or business, and the public. Provide information to the public that fosters understanding and promotes the organization in a favorable light."
- "To communicate accurate information about programs and policies under your jurisdiction."
- "To establish an open line of communication, to keep the public informed, and to feed off this and share opinions and establish a form of trust."
- "Public relations is a tool used by various organizations and entities to establish and maintain a rapport with their communities, customers and clients."
- "As a barber it is good to establish good communications with a patron. I have to let them know that I am confident in the work I do. This will ensure them that they will receive good service."
- "To explain the goals and objectives of a company or organization to the public."
- "To inform the public."
- "To keep the public informed. To share all information (good or bad) concerning products, services, etc."
- "In general I understand PR to promote the agency or individual to the public in a positive nature."
• "The purpose is to learn about different people and learn how to help them interact or work together, yet still be an individual, to get the most out of the group."

• "To persuade audiences of position, policies and reputations. To promote corporate and government images. To facilitate favorable news coverage and discourage or discredit unfavorable coverage."

• "To inform the public, community; to keep 'people' updated on issues or events about the company, organization that the public relations person represents."

• "To bring to the public's attention an activity or point of view of the PR client's choosing."

• "To create a positive image."

• "To influence the public's perception of institutions, events or activities."

• "To give proper information and communicate with others."

• "To establish an image for an individual or organization."

• "It's to make the public feel better or at least good about a person, product or company."

• "To sell a product, showing it in the best possible way ('product' being person, place or thing)."

• "Public relations provides through advertisement and media the mission and purpose of an organization in order to provide a service and/or inform the public."

• "To bridge the divide between the company and the general public."
• "Promotion and communication of the organization."

• "To allow for an organization (corporation, company, unit within a company, etc.) to provide information to the public and other interested parties about the job(s) they perform."

• "Public relations is the part of a company that is in charge of bridging the gap between the technical expertise of those who work at that company and the general public who do not necessarily possess such expertise."

• "A means of involving the public’s views in an attempt to maintain a good relationship between an organization and the public."
Question 2: How do you perceive public relations on a scale of one to seven for each of the following parts?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Trustworthy________ Untrustworthy
Ethical________ Unethical
Truthful________ Untruthful
Valuable________ Worthless
Favorably________ Unfavorably

This question was asked to get an overall view of how the survey participants perceive public relations. Respondents' perceptions were based on five parts: trustworthiness, ethics, truthfulness, value and favorableness.
This part of question two was asked to determine how trustworthy participants perceived public relations to be. Four percent perceived public relations to be "trustworthy." Twenty-eight percent perceived it to be "somewhat trustworthy." Forty-four percent of the respondents were "neutral" about the trustworthiness of public relations, and did not consider it trustworthy or untrustworthy. Twenty percent perceived public relations as "somewhat untrustworthy." Four percent perceived public relations as "untrustworthy."
This part of question two judged how ethical the respondents perceived public relations to be. Twelve percent perceived public relations as "ethical." Twenty-four percent perceived it as "somewhat ethical." Forty-eight percent were "neutral" on their perception of the ethicalness of public relations. Twelve percent perceived public relations to be "somewhat unethical." Four percent considered it "unethical."
The researcher used part three of question two to determine how truthful participants perceive public relations to be. Four percent perceived it as “truthful.” Twenty-four percent perceived it as “somewhat truthful.” Forty-four percent were “neutral” about public relations, neither truthful nor untruthful. Twenty percent found public relations to be “somewhat untruthful.” Eight percent found it to be “untruthful.”
Part four of question two determined how much value the participants perceived public relations to have. Value received more positive responses than any other part of question two. Twenty percent found it “very valuable.” Thirty-six percent found it “valuable.” Sixteen percent perceived public relations as somewhat valuable. Twenty-four percent of the respondents were “neutral.” Four percent perceived it as “somewhat worthless.”
Part five of question two was asked to determine how favorable the respondents perceived public relations to be. Twenty percent perceived it as “favorable.” Forty-four percent perceived it as “somewhat favorable.” Twenty-four percent were “neutral.” Eight percent perceived public relations to be “somewhat unfavorable.” Four percent perceived it as “unfavorable.”
Whom Do PR professionals Work in Best Interest Of?

The researcher asked this question to find out whom the respondents believe public relations professionals work in the best interest of. Respondents were able to circle as many answers as they saw fit.

Three responses stood out the most for this question. Thirty-six percent of the respondents felt that public relations professionals work in the best interest of their company and their client. Twenty percent of the respondents believed that public
company and their client. Twenty percent of the respondents believed that public relations professionals work in the best interest of their company. Twelve percent felt that public relations professionals work in the best interest of all four responses put together: their company, client, the public and themselves.
Question 4: How often do you trust information given by PR professionals?

In the first part of question two, forty-four percent of the respondents felt neutral about the trustworthiness of public relations. The responses to this part of question two relate to question four. Out of all the survey participants, 92 percent "sometimes" trust the information public relations professionals provide them.
Question 5: Do you think information provided by PR professionals is truthful?

This question relates to the third part of question two. In question two, when asked to rate how they perceived the truthfulness of public relations, 44 percent of the respondents said “neutral.” Out of all the survey participants, 96 percent said they think information provided by public relations professionals is truthful “sometimes.”
Question 6: Did Tylenol act in an ethical manner?

This question was asked after the respondents read a short case on the Tylenol cyanide crisis. The purpose of the case was to exemplify positive public relations. Question six determined whether or not respondents recognized that this case illustrated good ethics.

Eighty-eight percent felt that Tylenol did act in an ethical manner, while twelve percent felt they only “somewhat” acted in a ethical manner. Zero percent of the respondents said that Tylenol did not act in an ethical manner.
Question 7: After reading about Tylenol, how do you perceive public relations on a scale from one to seven for each of the following parts?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7


After reading the case, the researcher asked this question again to determine whether the respondents’ perceptions of public relations became more positive, more negative or stayed the same on all five parts – trustworthiness, ethics, truthfulness, value and favorableness. The responses to this question were then compared to the responses from question two.
Trustworthiness BEFORE Tylenol Case

Trustworthiness AFTER Tylenol Case
After reading the Tylenol case, the respondents' perceptions of public relations in terms of trustworthiness became more positive. The data represented a positively skewed curve.
Perceived Ethics BEFORE Tylenol Case

Perceived Ethics AFTER Tylenol Case
After reading the Tylenol case, the respondents perceived public relations to be more ethical than they did before reading the case. The data represented a positively skewed curve.

Truthfulness BEFORE Tylenol Case

Truthfulness AFTER Tylenol Case
After reading the Tylenol case, the respondents perceived public relations to be more truthful than before reading the case. The data represented a positively skewed curve.
Value/Worth BEFORE Tylenol Case

Value/Worth AFTER Tylenol Case
Even though the respondents perceived public relations to be very valuable before reading the Tylenol case, after reading the case, the respondents perceived public relations to be even more valuable.
Favorably: Unfavorably

Favorableness BEFORE Tylenol Case

Favorableness AFTER Tylenol Case
After reading the Tylenol case, the respondents perceived public relations to be more favorable than before reading the case. The data represented a positively skewed curve.
Question 8: After reading about Tylenol, do you have a different view of public relations?

Upon reading the Tylenol case, respondents were asked whether their view of public relations changed from before they read the case. The respondents gave explanations for their answers. Four percent answered “yes” to the above question. One respondent who answered “yes” said:

- “The problem was addressed and both the FDA and Johnson & Johnson worked with the consumer to correct the issue.”

Twenty-four percent of the respondents’ perceptions changed “somewhat.” Some of the explanations include:

- “They help people.”
• "Based on the passage, I feel more confident about the PR department of Tylenol."

• "The appropriate use of PR is all relative to the situation involved and the manner in which it is handled."

• "I believe the majority of companies are not as ethical or truthful in using PR. Most will try to put a positive spin on a negative without addressing the root problem."

Seventy percent of the respondents answered "no." Some of these explanations include:

• "I didn’t change my opinion because Tylenol is one of thousands of companies. Many of the others conducted themselves improperly."

• "Tylenol acted in a responsible way based upon the crisis the company faced. However, I continue to be somewhat suspect of public relations in our society."

• "PR will always try to put a positive spin on events. In doing so, PR will often be selective in disclosing the facts. So if I get information through a PR source, I know it is not the whole story."

• PR enabled *Johnson & Johnson* to sustain public consumers. They did their expected job."

• PR is to put the best spin on a topic for their client. PR is to make the client look good."
The purpose of this study was three-fold. The first purpose was to determine how key communicators in today’s society feel about the public relations field. The second purpose was to show that positive public relations does take place, by providing participants with the Tylenol cyanide case. The third purpose of this study was to change the negative perceptions society holds for public relations, so that public relations will lose its negative image.

All of the key communicators who participated in this study had similar perceptions about the purpose of public relations. The main purpose of public relations as told by the survey participants was to “inform.” More survey participants said “to Inform” more than any other response. When judged on their perceptions of public relations, the majority of the survey participants did not have negative perceptions. The respondents had neutral perceptions about the trustworthiness, ethicalness and truthfulness of public relations. Their responses created a normal curve. When asked how they perceive the value/worth and the favorableness of public relations, the responses were positively skewed. As a result, the respondents favor public relations and
recognize its value, even though they do not feel it is completely trustworthy, ethical or truthful.

When asked who public relations professionals work in the best interest of, three responses stood out. Thirty-six percent said the public relations professionals' company and the client. Twenty percent said the company. Twelve percent said the company, client, public and the public relations professionals themselves. The survey participants' responses reflect a positive image. None of the participants said that public relations professionals work in the best interest of only themselves, which would reflect a negative perception.

While many of the respondents have a positive perception of public relations, 92 percent trust information given to them by public relations professionals only some of the time; and 96 percent believe information public relations professionals provide only some of the time.

After reading the Tylenol case, most of the respondents did feel Tylenol acted in an ethical manner. Eighty-eight percent said Tylenol acted ethically. Once the survey participants read the case, the researcher wanted to determine whether the participants' perceptions of public relations became more positive, negative or stayed the same on all five parts - trustworthiness, ethicalness, truthfulness, value and favorableness.

Following the case, the participants' responses were positively skewed. They did perceive public relations as more trustworthy, ethical, truthful, valuable and favorable. The responses after the Tylenol case were skewed more positively than the responses before the Tylenol case. Even though the responses were more positively skewed, respondents with negative perceptions before the Tylenol case perceived public relations
only slightly better than they did before the case. Therefore, the negative perceptions before the Tylenol case did not become positive after the Tylenol case.

Conclusions

Based on the review of existing literature and the results of the survey, the researcher has determined the following:

Purpose 1: To determine how key communicators in today's society feel about the public relations profession.

Conclusion: Most of the key communicators surveyed have positive perceptions about public relations. Most importantly, they feel the profession is very valuable.

Purpose 2: To show that positive public relations does take place.

Conclusion: The respondents understood that Tylenol practiced good public relations and acted in an ethical manner.

Purpose 3: To change the negative perceptions society holds for public relations, so it will lose its negative image.

Conclusion: After reading the Tylenol case, the respondents had a more positive perception of public relations than they did before reading the Tylenol case. However, it was not enough for the negative perceptions to become positive.

Recommendations for Further Study

The researcher recommends distributing the same survey to a larger sample size. Due to time constraints the researcher was limited to a small sample of 25 key
communicators. A larger sample size would provide more statistically accurate results, which then could be generalized to the larger population.

The media are agenda-setters, meaning they tell us what to think about. Therefore, another recommendation for future study is to determine if the media influence the public’s perception of public relations.
Bibliography


Hello, I am conducting this survey to gather research for the thesis I am writing for my Master's degree in public relations at Rowan University. The purpose is to determine how key communicators perceive public relations. You are a “key communicator” - someone who talks to many people on a daily basis, and shares his or her opinion with others. Your responses are greatly appreciated. For your responses to be valid, please answer every question. Thank you for your help.

1. What do you think is the purpose of public relations?

2. How do you perceive public relations on a scale of one to seven for each of the following rows?

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3. PR professionals work in the best interest of ______ (circle all that apply).
   - Their company
   - Their client
   - The public
   - Themselves

4. How often do you trust information given by PR professionals?
   - Always
   - Sometimes
   - Rarely
   - Never

5. Do you think information provided by PR professionals is truthful?
   - Always
   - Sometimes
   - Rarely
   - Never

Please read the following to answer questions 6-8.

In 1982 someone contaminated Tylenol packages with cyanide, killing seven people. Tylenol’s parent company, Johnson & Johnson, immediately pulled over $100 million worth of Tylenol products off shelves nationwide.

Throughout the next several days, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) worked with Tylenol to provide the public with a continuous flow of information about the incident. The FDA developed a standard tamper-proof package and required nonprescription drug manufacturers to use it.

Tylenol put its credo, “For this we stand,” on display for the world to see. The CEO and company spokespeople sustained leadership roles and authority.
Tylenol continuously updated the public with new information, whether it was good or bad. Tylenol gladly accepted the public’s input.

A large campaign, including a 30-city teleconference, reintroduced Tylenol to the market. Johnson & Johnson shipped Tylenol back to stores in new tamper-proof containers. Consumers who had thrown out their Tylenol received a free new package. Despite the tragedy, Tylenol captured over 70 percent of the market share, more than they had before the crisis.

6. Did Tylenol act in an ethical manner?
   Yes  Somewhat  No  Don’t know

7. After reading about Tylenol, how do you perceive public relations on a scale of one to seven for each of the following rows?

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   Trustworthy____:____:____:____:____:____:____:____Untrustworthy
   Ethical____:____:____:____:____:____:____:____Unethical
   Truthful____:____:____:____:____:____:____:____Untruthful
   Valuable____:____:____:____:____:____:____:____Worthless
   Favorably____:____:____:____:____:____:____:____Unfavorably

8. After reading about Tylenol, do you have a different view of public relations?
   Yes  Somewhat  No  Don’t know

   Please explain

9. What is your job?

10. How long have you had this job?

11. What age range do you fall into?

   18-24  25-34  35-49  50-65  over 65

Thanks again for completing this survey.
February 10, 2003

Hello ____________,

I am conducting a survey to gather research for the thesis I am writing for my Master’s degree in public relations at Rowan University. The purpose is to determine how key communicators perceive public relations. You are considered a “key communicator,” someone who talks to many people on a daily basis, and shares his or her opinions with others.

Would you be willing to complete the survey? It should take approximately 10 minutes to complete. Your responses will be greatly appreciated.

Thank you,

Kamali Brooks