

## REFLECTIONS ON THE STATE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN MARKET-PLACE: A RESEARCH SURVEY

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### ABSTRACT

*Public relations is a discipline finding itself on the metaphorical banks of the Rubicon: It is seeking to position itself as a significant player in the marketing and management field. Endeavours to achieve a higher state of strategic significance are already underway under the auspices of the official body for public relations: PRISA. However, the question needs to be asked whether public relations practitioners are themselves ready to become strategically significant players, and whether they understand the contribution that their function can make to organisational success. This debate in the communication community, and perceptions of public relations practitioners, form the focus of a research survey recently carried out. This survey investigates the relationship between the function of public relations and other management functions, including marketing, marketing communication, and strategic management, and establishes what public relations practitioners' views are regarding their role vis-à-vis these management functions.*

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## INTRODUCTION

When reading current articles, publications, weblogs, and debates about the state of public relations today, the reader is struck by the almost feverish pitch at which practitioners and academics seek to position the discipline as a serious contender for the boardroom table, as well as being the “new” alternative to advertising.

In their bestseller on the relationship between public relations and advertising - *The fall of advertising and the rise of PR* – Al and Laura Ries (2002: XII) declare: “[a]dvertising is dead. Long live PR”. The clarion call was taken up by the public relations community, echoing sentiments like those of Sally Falkow (2003, July 6) who reviewed this book and declared that “[w]hen you position yourself as a brand building expert, you will be more likely to convince your CEO that PR can deliver the goods”.

The findings of the King II Report on Corporate Governance were likewise embraced by the public relations community in their quest for the repositioning of public relations in the organisation. Jensen (2003: 6) goes so far as to state that the King II Report’s requirements for relations with stakeholders “ensure a strategic public relations seat right next to the CEO of any boardroom table”.

In addition, PRISA – the Institute for Public Relations and Communication Management – is involved in endeavours to reposition the profession. During 2003, PRISA moved from the Marketing Chamber to the Business Chamber of the Services SETA (Sectoral Education and Training Authority), while it took the initiative to play a leading role in forming a single professional body. This body will be known as the Council for Public Relations and Communication Management (Moscardi 2003: 4).

The rationale behind the move from the Marketing Chamber to the Business Chamber of the Services SETA was explained in an e-mail sent to its members by PRISA on 10 December 2002, and reads as follows:

The public relations and communication activities which fall within the marketing sphere are small (i.e. promotions, marketing communication etc.) and PRISA members have made it clear that they are not “part of marketing” but rather contribute to the business management function ... members indicated that they would be delighted to have the public relations and communication management function positioned within business, rather than marketing as it “was good for their own positioning of the function within their organisations” (Richardson 2002).

Management function. Not part of marketing. More effective than advertising. Small part of the marketing sphere. These phrases point to the core of a debate that has been going on for a number of years in the public relations community. For many years public relations practitioners have been struggling to define their role in the organisation and to convince management of the strategic contribution that public relations can make to organisational success. It is obvious that this discussion is also of importance to workers involved in community communications, where the role of communication is sometimes relegated to the sidelines.

This debate is not yet over, as is witnessed by any number of articles in this regard that appear regularly in *Communika*, the mouthpiece of PRISA. The one curious aspect

about this debate and repositioning is this: the debate is one-sided. No significant thinkers in either the field of management or marketing seem to join the fray! While public relations practitioners, textbooks, and published articles alike jointly clamour to be heard, the functions against which PR is positioning itself are (strangely?) silent participants in the debate.

Could this be because the argument itself is flawed? Or could this be the result of a misapprehension among the cadres of public relations practitioners themselves that make for a non-debate?

In order to find answers to these (and other, related) questions, a research survey was conducted in 2003 among public relations practitioners in South Africa.

### SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH

While discussions in online forums, articles, books, and serious research on this debate are ongoing, it is becoming apparent that there is a *fundamental disagreement* on the contribution of public relations to the success of organisations. This disagreement needed to be investigated.

At its heart, the disagreement on this contribution may be verbalised as follows:

- Is there a direct relationship between public relations and marketing?
- What is the nature of this relationship?
- Is there a link between public relations and marketing communication?
- What is the nature of this link?
- Should public relations be seen as a strategic management function?
- What is the nature of this function?

And, perhaps most importantly, *do South African public relations practitioners understand the relationship between public relations and these functions?*

That public relations practitioners are debating these questions, and *not* marketers or advertising practitioners, possibly speaks volumes of the extent to which public relations practitioners seek to understand their own strategic contributions to organisational success.

Here is an example of the feeling with which some public relations practitioners discuss the uneasy relationship between public relations and other disciplines:

South African advertising agencies began to take PR seriously, about four years ago, when the bigger agencies established their own PR divisions, or bought majority shares in existing PR agencies. The result was disappointing for both, since the advertising agencies tried to dominate and dictate, trying to turn the PR arm into an advertising agency. The PR teams were still largely old-school and had not quite shifted into the next gear of Power PR. Also, both the advertising and PR teams were territorial and competitive, often sabotaging each other's efforts (Aronson 2003).

In short: it would seem as if public relations practitioners are uncertain and unclear about the strategic contribution that they could make to organisational success.

The research concerned itself with these questions, and also sought to establish whether public relations practitioners are, indeed, not certain about their strategic contribution to organisational success.

As a first step, an extensive literature review of (current) articles and textbooks was conducted to establish any patterns in the overall discussions. This review also served as the basis for the construction of the research instrument.

### **SAMPLING AND QUESTIONNAIRE**

The sampling element required for the research was South African public relations practitioners. PRISA, established in 1957, has in excess of 5 000 members who are involved in the profession of public relations in one way or another. Academic qualifications and experience is the basis on which PRISA manages a registration level of members, ranking from Affiliate (lowest level) to Accredited in Public Relations (highest level) (Skinner et al. 2001: 22).

In order to qualify for the registration level of Public Relations Practitioner (PRP) and higher, members need at least three years of full-time public relations experience and a tertiary qualification (not necessarily in public relations). Considering the nature of this research, respondents who have a number of years experience in the field of public relations would be in a better position to comment on certain of the issues than, say, a student member. For this reason, it was decided to implement a random stratified sample by type of membership.

With the help of Helena van Wyk, Training Manager at the PRISA Education and Training Centre, an e-mail database was made available for this research (e-mail to author dated 8 December 2003). This database contains the e-mail addresses of all members of the study population, and totalled (on 8 December 2003) 540 members from all over South Africa. No other delimitations such as age, income, organisation size, etc. were introduced for the purpose of the research.

An e-mail, containing a letter asking for respondents to cooperate and the questionnaire, was sent in bulk format to the entire database on 9 December 2003. By 15 December 2003, chosen as the cut-off date for the survey, 112 individuals replied. This means that the reply rate on the survey is at 20,7 %, sufficiently large to allow for meaningful analysis.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature review of current texts in the fields of marketing, marketing communication, and strategic management indicates that the three disciplines covered in the research (public relations, marketing, and management) do not see eye to eye regarding the role of public relations.

Wilcox et al. (2000: 29) succinctly describe the uneasy relationship between public relations and other related functions as follows:

Public relations has historically been relegated to a market-support function, concentrating on techniques instead of strategy ... [p]roblems also arise when advertising agencies attempt to do integrated programs. In many cases, 90 percent of the budget is spent on advertising and 10 percent or less on public relations ... [public relations professionals are thus wary of integrated communications, and] see it as a veiled attempt by marketing or advertising to reduce public relations to a product-publicity function.

The discussion about the role of public relations is important because, if a discipline were to make a strategically significant contribution to the success of organisations, its practitioners should understand – clearly – what the contribution is that their discipline makes. This should then enable them to articulate – to other functions in the organisation – what their function’s contribution is to the organisation’s overall strategic success. However, they can only do this if *they themselves* understand their contribution.

Standard marketing textbooks, notably Kotler and Armstrong (2004), as well as Perreault and McCarthy (2002), view public relations as a function that obtains favourable publicity for a product/service. In the words of Perreault and McCarthy (2002: 393) the function of public relations is “publicity”, while this function (publicity) is described as “any *unpaid* form of nonpersonal presentation of ideas, goods, or services ... [public relations practitioners] try to attract attention to the firm and its offerings *without having to pay media costs*” (italics in original text).

In addition to marketers, advertising specialists also take a narrow view of public relations. Wells, Burnett and Moriarty (2003: 81) state that public relations “seeks to enhance the company’s image, and includes publicity ... news conferences, company-sponsored events, open houses, plant tours, and donations”. Russell and Lane (2002: 27) take care to present the definition of the Public Relations Society of America, but add that “some marketing executives view public relations as useful to set the stage for advertising, especially for new product introductions”.

Public relations, on the other hand, sees itself as a function that is more than marketing, and here lies the crux of the debate between public relations practitioners and other functions.

## **MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH**

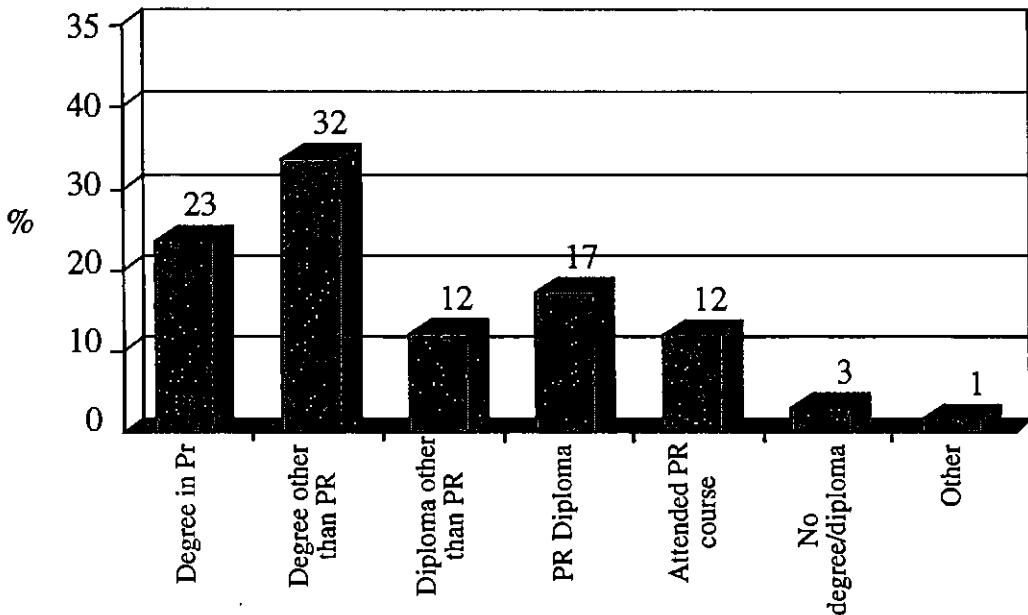
As was stated earlier in this article, the survey focused its attention on members of the (only) South African public relations body, PRISA, and senior members at that.

*More than half* of all registered members of PRISA, and who are people that actively practice public relations as a profession, did *not* study public relations as a discipline.

This in spite of the fact that the majority of respondents (79%) are accredited with PRISA on the Public Relations Practitioner (PRP) level and higher, denoting (in the PRISA system) a senior level of accreditation that reflects experience in public relations, and some form of tertiary education completed.

How well qualified are PRISA members, and what did they study? This question reveals some interesting facts:

**Figure 1** Qualifications of respondents as a percentage of the total sample

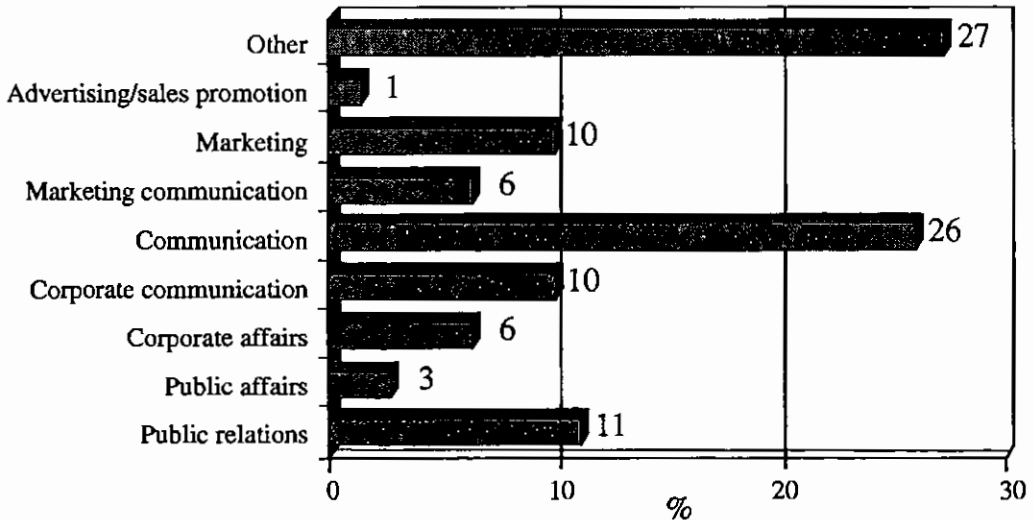


Is it a reflection of the state of the debate in public relations that nearly half of the respondents (47,3%) have either no degree/diploma (2,7%), or a qualification in a field other than public relations (44,6 %)? This situation could pose interesting questions when examining the opinions of members for the simple reason that the qualification in public relations should help to contribute to an understanding of the role and nature of public relations. In other words, people who did not study in the field of public relations may be influenced by their particular disciplines to the detriment of the body of knowledge in public relations.

Of course, the counter-argument may well be that these members (who did not study public relations) may bring new insights into the world of public relations, and may be untainted by a confused theory base. If it were true that the body of knowledge in existence for public relations is itself confused about the nature and role of public relations, it may well be that students in public relations are taught, from an early age, that public relations has a hazy role in the organisation. It is interesting to note, for instance, that the literature review clearly indicates that (for example) marketing texts exhibit none of the existential *angst* found in public relations texts. This insight bears further research and discussion.

Respondents who were *not working for public relations consultancies* were asked to indicate what their respective departments are called:

Figure 2 Department names



Steyn and Puth (2000: 5–6) refer to the confusion that often exists between related terms such as corporate communication, business communication, organisational communication, management communication, and communication management. They state that “recent trends indicate a clear shift in preference in using the term corporate communication rather than the traditional public relations”. A main reason for this is “negative associations with the way in which the function was practised in the past”.

The confusion is borne out by the reality reflected in the research results: public relations practitioners, who indicated that they are (mostly) involved in public relations activities on a daily basis, work in departments with different names. Is it any wonder that there is a possible confusion over the nature and role of public relations?

Slightly more than six out of every ten respondents (64,3 %) believe that training will aid in helping public relations consultants to do more strategic planning, while slightly more than half of all respondents (51,3%) indicated that public relations does not always/never earns the recognition it receives from top management. More than 90 % of respondents do believe that greater professionalism on the part of public relations practitioners will result in greater recognition from top management.

The research so far indicates two significant issues. They are (in no particular order) the following:

- Are public relations practitioners *suitably qualified* to fulfil their functions?
- Is the *confusion* with *naming* public relations departments part of the general confusion surrounding the role and function of public relations in the organisation?

For the purposes of further analysis, respondents from certain types of organisations have been grouped together according to a specific criterion based on the way in which the particular organisation relates to marketing.

The category “PR Consultancy” remains on its own as a category, while government, non-government, and political organisations have been grouped together. Service providers, product manufacturers, and retailers have been grouped together under the heading “private sector”.

The rationale behind this grouping of respondents by types of organisation is very simply this: the importance of marketing as an organisational function in the organisation.

What does this mean? Government organisations, non-government organisations, and political parties typically would not have a marketing department, while manufacturers, retailers, and service providers will have such departments. Obviously, public relations consultancies stand alone in this regard – they interact with both private sector and government/non-government organisations.

Do different kinds of organisations view the situation differently from one another, or not? The scores (based on a Likert rating, with 1 denoting agreement, and 5 denoting no agreement whatsoever), per sector, are reflected in *Table 1* below:

**Table 1 Public relations practitioners should be considered technicians**

CATEGORY	TOTAL	Govt/non govt	Private sector	PR Consultancy	Other
Public relations practitioners should be considered technicians	3.21	2.97	2.95	3.39	3.88

Public relations consultants feel most strongly that public relations practitioners should *not* be considered as technicians alone. It is one of the recurring themes in the industry that public relations practitioners should be seen as more than “mere” technicians.

This issue is important. CEOs, according to Steyn and Puth (2000: 20–21), expect public relations practitioners to play three roles:

- Strategist;
- Manager; and
- Technician.

The technician role is “played at the implementation or programme level” (Steyn & Puth 2000: 21) and was traditionally played by public relations practitioners. This is not the only role that public relations practitioners should play anymore – they should also act as managers and strategists. This view is borne out by the research.

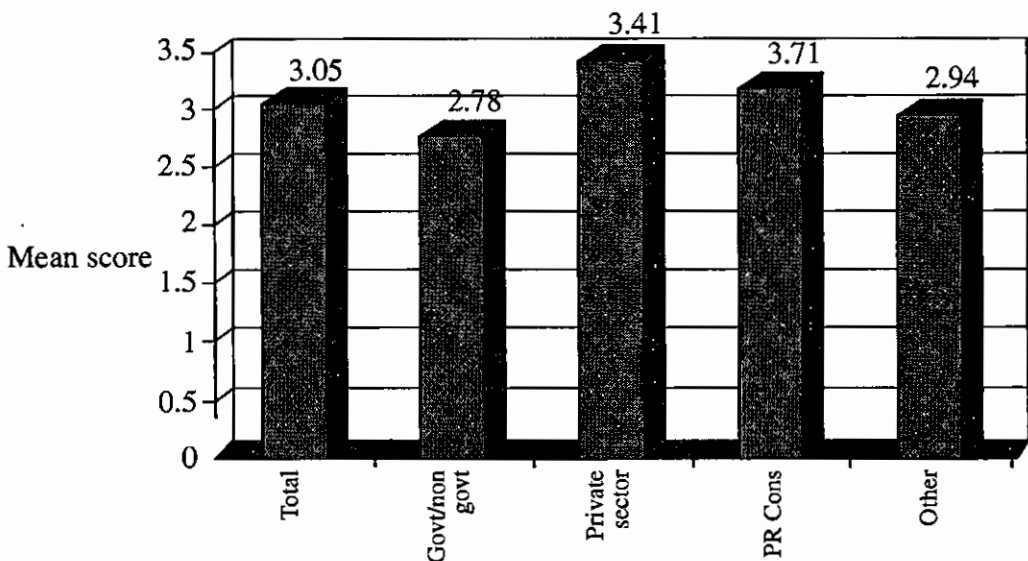


Respondents agree fully that public relations should be a strategic function.

Public relations consultancies have heard and accepted this gospel. Significantly, respondents who work for the private sector companies agree least with this statement, pointing to the possibility that there is still work that needs to be done to explain the strategic contribution of public relations to the organisation's success. Again, the question is whether respondents would not agree most fully with this statement if they were completely sure about their role in organisational success.

It is significant to note that respondents feel that public relations practitioners need more training and education to be involved in strategic planning:

**Figure 3 Practitioners are sufficiently trained and educated to be involved in strategic planning**



Respondents from the private sector, closely followed by public relations practitioners, *disagreed* with the statement that public relations practitioners have sufficient training and education to enable them to be involved in strategic planning. This clearly indicates a *need for more education* among public relations practitioners on this aspect of the discipline.

Could it be that the identified lack in training is partly to blame for the discussions surrounding the role of public relations in management, marketing, and marketing communication? And if this were the case, could the debate be settled merely by adjusting existing training modules?

There is a need for broader training and education of public relations practitioners in the fields of management, marketing, and marketing communication. This should be addressed.

## PUBLIC RELATIONS AND MARKETING

According to respondents, public relations is not a marketing discipline. In reaction to the statement that "public relations is a marketing discipline", respondents disagreed with a mean average of 2.88 – not a resounding disagreement, but a disagreement nonetheless.

**Table 2 Views on public relations and marketing**

CATEGORY	TOTAL	Gov/non govt	Private sector	PR Consultancy	Other
Public relations is a marketing discipline	2.88	3.03	2.95	2.41	3.24

Government and non-government agencies (as well as "other") feel very strongly that public relations is *not* a marketing discipline, while public relations consultancies feel that it is a marketing discipline. Could this be because government organisations do not, as a rule, practice marketing?

Since these organisations do not practice marketing (at least in the commercial sense of the word), it is conceivable that they would view public relations in its "purer" sense – that of a communication discipline.

Public relations consultancies, on the other hand, are normally in contact with all sorts of organisations (ranging from government through manufacturing) and will, therefore, have developed a sensibility for the need of implementing the marketing philosophy; thereby understanding that public relations is linked to marketing. But even the public relations consultancies do not view public relations only as a marketing discipline. The theory needs to provide guidance in partial answer to this question: is public relations a discipline of marketing, or is it a discipline in its own right? This question seems to lie at the heart of the "public relations versus marketing" debate.

The relationship between public relations and marketing has already proven to be a bone of contention in the world of public relations academics. That South African public relations practitioners also seem to have difficulty to clearly understand the link between the two disciplines may point in the direction of a possible rejection of the hypothesis that public relations practitioners understand their contribution to organisational success.

## PUBLIC RELATIONS AND MARKETING COMMUNICATION

It is not very easy to define exactly what is meant by “integrated marketing communication”, according to Rensburg and Cant (2003: 6), although three general principles in integrated marketing communication may be identified as being: “knowing the customer, building the brand and measuring effectiveness” (Rensburg & Cant 2003: 20). Integrated marketing communication is a valuable tool in positioning the organisation, and in building relationships with its customers (current and potential).

Chataway and Baird (2003: 8) are adamant that integration of communication is a definite future trend for communication specialists in South Africa, and state that integrated [marketing] communication, at its very core, “leverages all communication in a co-ordinated and creative fashion to enable the achievement of clear business objectives”.

Integrated marketing communication is most certainly a strategic function of the organisation, whereby all of the communication tools at its disposal is used in such a way that the organisation achieves its (marketing) objectives. This view of the strategic nature of integrated marketing communication can be found in all major texts on the subject, including Koekemoer (1998); Du Plessis et al. (2001); Duncan (2002); and Clow and Baack (2004).

What do respondents have to say about the relationship between public relations and other marketing communication tools?

**Table 3 Views on public relations and marketing communication**

CATEGORY	TOTAL	Gov/non gov	Private-sector	PR Consultancy	Other
Organisations should spend more money on public relations than they do on advertising ensuring that a brand gets promoted.	2.63	2.82	2.65	2.23	2.61
All forms of marketing communication should be executed by public relations practitioners.	2.51	2.33	2.38	2.77	2.61
Public relations is the only function in the organisation that should manage the communication processes.	2.19	2.16	2.36	2.30	1.82
All organisation communication should be channelled through public relations departments.	1.87	1.76	2.00	1.97	1.78
Public relations should be the primary function for communicating to the internal public.	1.79	1.84	1.67	1.93	1.67

organisation and partly on the shoulders of other functional departments. Considering that the internal public is a key public to the organisation, and that internal marketing is essential in relationship building, the situation seems to warrant (at least) cooperation between marketing and public relations.

PRISA endeavours to position public relations in the business chamber of the Services SETA, in order to contribute to the larger business function (as opposed to "only" marketing). This step is significant in more ways than one. It indicates, firstly, that public relations practitioners have discovered that their contribution to organisational success is greater than a marketing tool. Furthermore, it points to the support among PRISA members for the fact that their function contributes to organisational success. It is against a background such as this that the debate on the strategic nature of public relations naturally presents itself. The simple question is: What is the nature of the contribution that public relations makes to the organisation?

## CONCLUSION

In order to answer this question we need to revert to themes that were identified earlier on in this article, namely public relations and marketing; public relations and marketing communication; and public relations and management.

The fact that most respondents agreed with the statements regarding management and strategic management point to the need expressed in the public relations community for their discipline to be given necessary management status.

Public relations does not always get the recognition it deserves from top management in South African organisations. This viewpoint is not new, and is surprising, given the fact that South African CEOs and top managers realise the importance and necessity of communication to the organisation (Steyn & Puth 2000: 7). This somewhat surprising situation is attributed by Steyn and Puth (2000: 8) to an inability on the part of public relations practitioners to "think, behave and perform strategically in the organisation".

This statement provides the first clue to the researcher that the emperor is perhaps not fully clothed. Dissatisfaction with top management recognition as a result of an inability to make a strategic contribution to the organisation may indicate that South African public relations practitioners do not fully understand their contribution to organisational success.

Adding to the confusion experienced by public relations practitioners, may be the fact that so much uncertainty exists on the name of the discipline itself. The survey results indicate that practitioners, who are employed by organisations to be involved in public relations work, are employed by a number of differently named departments: communication, public affairs, etc. It is a singularly untenable position for public relations practitioners to occupy – marketers work for the marketing department; human resource officers work in the human resource department; financial officers work in the financial department, and so on, while public relations practitioners work in a confusing panoply of differently named departments. While the argument could be made that a name in itself does not guarantee excellence (Steyn & Puth 2000: 7), it certainly helps to identify the activities performed in such a department.

It is interesting (but not surprising) to note that public relations consultancies agree most with the statement that public relations should attract more money than advertising does in promoting a brand. The score of 2.32 for this category points the attention in the direction of the debate so succinctly discussed in Ries and Ries (2002), who advocate a situation where public relations should receive the lion's share of the organisation's promotion budget. According to these authors, public relations is the latest brand-building tool – not advertising.

It is also noteworthy that governmental and non-governmental organisations agree least with this statement – possibly because they do not advertise in the marketing sense of the word, but rather in the public relations sense of the word. In other words, government and non-government organisations would use advertising as a public relations tool to build image, but would have little use for advertising to market a product/service. To them, therefore, advertising has but one use – to serve public relations.

Public relations consultants disagree most with the statement that all forms of marketing communications should be executed by public relations, pointing to a measure of sensitivity for the specialisation required by other marketing communication tools such as selling, advertising, and sales promotions. It is again significant to note that government/non-government organisations agree most with this statement – again, a question of whether these organisations practise “pure” marketing. This view (of government/non-government organisations) is repeated under the statement that *all communications* should be channelled through the public relations department, while the private sector disagrees most with this statement.

Is it reason for happiness to note that public relations practitioners agree that all communications should *not* be managed by public relations? Certainly, some forms of communication must be managed by the particular functional department. A human resources manager, for instance, will want to communicate a message to his/her department in memorandum form. The question is whether this memorandum should be generated by the public relations department? Of course not – however, the public relations department can (for example) present training on how to write a good memorandum.

It is significant to note that integrated marketing communication requires a *cross-functional* perspective. In the words of Lane and Russell (2001: 8), who write from an advertising perspective, integration of promotional functions will require future professionals to “make decisions about the role that both advertising and other promotional tools will play in any particular campaign”, while these decisions will be based on an evaluation of “marketing goals and strategies, identification of prime prospects, product characteristics, and the budget available for all areas of the communication mix”.

Is public relations solely responsible for internal communication? Most respondents seem to agree – at least partially – with this statement. This responsibility, it may be argued, will rest partly on the shoulders of the public relations function in an

It also does not help that nearly half of all public relations practitioners in the study population (47,3%) do not have formal qualifications in the field of public relations. While doctors study medicine, and accountants B.Comm, public relations practitioners do not seem to require formal qualifications in public relations. This situation must be addressed in one way or another. If someone studied a discipline other than public relations, it stands to reason that he/she may be incapable of understanding the nature of public relations as well as the strategic contribution that public relations may make to organisational success. For example, someone who studied journalism may understand press release writing and media liaison, but may not understand marketing, marketing communication, and strategic management of public relations. This will contribute to a situation where public relations practitioners are unclear about their role in management.

Again, the facts seem to point in the direction of public relations practitioners not understanding their strategic contribution to organisational success.

Respondents disagree with the statement that public relations practitioners should not be considered to be technicians, while they also agree that public relations is a strategic function. So far, so good: in order to make a strategic contribution to the organisation, a practitioner should be considered as more than a technician, and should definitely see him/herself in the role of a strategic partner. But merely stating that this is the case does not necessarily make it so. In order to understand the strategic contribution that a function makes to organisational success, it needs to understand the *nature* of the contribution that the strategic partner can make.

## MARKETING

Respondents indicated that public relations is a necessary part of marketing. This viewpoint is supported by the theory, which clearly points to a link between public relations and marketing, with public relations acting as a support function to marketing in order to achieve strategic marketing objectives.

Although public relations theory is loath to state the link in language as strong as that used in the previous paragraph, sufficient theoretical and academic evidence exists to suggest that public relations is indeed a necessary part of marketing. With respondents agreeing to this statement, a clue emerges that public relations practitioners in South Africa do understand public relations' contribution to the marketing function.

The fragile clue pointing in the direction of respondents being mainly clear about the public relations/marketing link is somewhat tarnished, however, when it emerges that there is dissent among the ranks regarding the *nature* of this link. Respondents indicated uncertainty when reacting to the statement that "public relations should sometimes manage marketing". The question is immediately this: if it were true that the two functions are separate disciplines in their own right (and prevailing theory strongly advocates for this to be the case), then one should not manage the other. Respondents were, however, not convinced that this is the case. For instance, 21% of respondents who work at public relations consultancies strongly agreed with this statement, while a further 21% agreed with it. More disconcertingly, 28% had no opinion on this

statement. This certainly points the researcher to the conclusion that respondents in this category are uncertain about the nature of their contribution to the organisation's (marketing) success. The pattern is repeated in the other two sectors – more than half of the respondents working in the private sector, and nearly half of all respondents working in the government/non-government sector agree or strongly agree that public relations should sometimes manage marketing. This flies in the face of accepted functional management theory.

The situation is compounded by a perceived need of respondents for practitioners to be *trained* in marketing and advertising.

When public relations interacts with marketing, it serves primarily as a marketing communication tool, assisting the marketing department in achieving its strategic objectives (by, *inter alia*, doing product launches, assisting in media relations, and so on). As such, it is informed by the marketing strategy, and guided by the marketing department. Just as advertising agencies (communication specialists in the area of advertising) receive briefs from the marketing department based on the marketing strategy, so should public relations departments/consultancies be briefed. How they react to the brief - what special techniques are used, etc. - is up to the specialist – the public relations practitioner. It would therefore seem as if the practitioner acts as a technician (and manager) when he/she interacts with marketing. But he/she manages the public relations function, and not the marketing function.

The fact that respondents do not clearly state this as being the case, is yet another clue that points the researcher in the direction of concluding that South African public relations practitioners do not understand their strategic contribution to organisational success.

Marketing's primary constituency is the customer; while suppliers, competitors, employees, unions, distributors (channels) are also regarded as important links in the organisation's total value chain. As such, marketers have to ensure smooth communication links with these publics. A rocky relationship with any of these publics would jeopardise the organisation's marketing effort, and thereby the organisation's chances of long term sustainability. Is it, then, in the organisation's strategic interest to suffer a turf war between marketing and public relations on the "ownership" of certain publics? The obvious answer to that question is no, and again points to the nature of the relationship between marketing and public relations: the marketing department requires someone who, with specialist knowledge in certain communication techniques, can assist it in achieving marketing objectives. As such, the public relations practitioner plays the role of technician – or tactician – to the marketing strategy. In drawing up a public relations programme, and in managing that programme in conjunction with the marketing strategy, the public relations practitioner acts out his/her role as manager. But, where it comes to *achieving marketing objectives*, the marketing manager will be firmly ensconced in the driver's seat – not the public relations manager.

The relationship between public relations and marketing is cross-functional in nature, where the public relations practitioner acts as professional support function to the

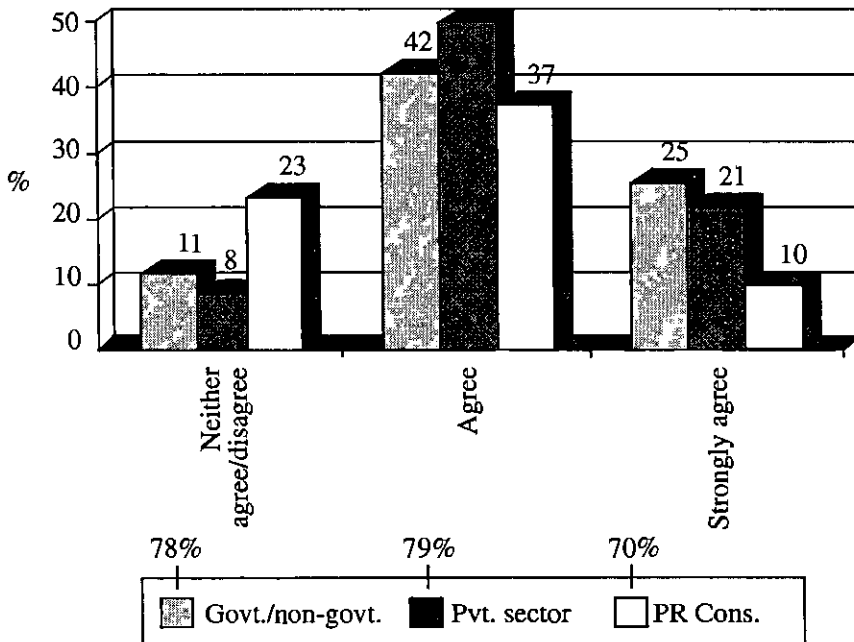
marketing function. This professional support comes to the marketing manager in the form of expertise in the field of communication.

## MARKETING COMMUNICATION

A public relations practitioner is trained in a variety of communication techniques, excluding techniques such as sales promotion, advertising, and personal selling.

Yet, respondents seem to believe that *all forms* of marketing communication should be *executed* by public relations practitioners:

**Figure 4** All forms of marketing communication should be executed by practitioners: by sector, percentages that are uncertain, agree, and strongly agree.



This graph reflects a disturbing viewpoint. A clear understanding of the nature of marketing communication, and the abilities of public relations practitioners, would result in all respondents *disagreeing* with this statement. However, the vast majority agree with the statement that all forms of marketing communication belong in the executional control of public relations.

When searching for an indication that South African public relations practitioners clearly understand their strategic contribution to organisational success, this graph would be the wrong starting-point. Another disturbing aspect of this result is that it seems to point to a mentality of control, pointing to a desire to control all marketing communication – surely another turf war.



This need for control is echoed in replies to the statement that all organisational communication should be channelled through public relations departments. Apart from the obvious bureaucratic nightmare that this may cause (does this mean that all internal memoranda, for instance, have to be vetted by public relations?), the fact that respondents seem to favour this state of affairs again points to a dream of empire building. Delusions of grandeur in this regard are further awoken when respondents reply that public relations is the only function in the organisation that should manage all communication processes.

There is a strong link between public relations and marketing communication. The nature of the relationship is cross-functional and should be strategic in nature, depending on the organisation's particular needs and situation. The survey results indicate that public relations practitioners are unclear in their minds about this relationship.

This does *not* support the hypothesis that public relations practitioners are clear about their contribution regarding marketing communication, as well as communication functions in the organisation.

## MANAGEMENT

The research set out to examine the premise that South African public relations practitioners understand their strategic contribution to the success of organisations.

Public relations can make a *tactical and strategic contribution* to the organisation. On the tactical level, public relations practitioners make their contributions to marketing and marketing communication, while it certainly also can serve as a communication counsellor to the other management functions (such as human resources, finance, operations, and so on). In this instance, public relations is a staff function. Existing theory seems to support this view of the management nature of public relations.

As tactical staff function, the public relations practitioner is a manager of all of his/her public relations activities, planning, organising, leading, and controlling the activities needed to carry out his/her function.

It is, however, as strategic management function that public relations still needs to find its place in the organisation. There seems little doubt that it can make a strategic contribution to the organisation's long-term success. Enough literature supports this notion, although very little has as yet been written about this subject in South Africa.

The vast majority of respondents have indicated that practitioners in South Africa *need more education and training* in strategic management principles, and that practitioners are as yet insufficiently educated in this subject-matter.

The survey results do not, however, yield sufficient evidence to support the hypothesis that South African public relations practitioners clearly understand the link between their discipline and that of management or strategic management.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Insufficient evidence was found in the empirical research to accept the hypothesis that public relations practitioners in South Africa clearly understand the strategic contribution of their discipline to organisational success.

This may be attributed to three phenomena:

- The state of confusion in the existing theory (body of knowledge).
- The fact that public relations practitioners have educational backgrounds that sometimes do not include formal training in public relations.
- The fact that most respondents feel that they require more education and training.

A study of the relevant textbooks confirms this confusion, and it becomes apparent that the following is needed:

- Re-training (or, at least, training) of public relations professionals in their field of practice.
- Training of public relations practitioners in the field of marketing, as well as management.
- The development of a coherent and cogent theoretical framework that makes provision for the inclusion of public relations as a “serious” business discipline.

There clearly is much work to be done by public relations – both as a profession and an academic discipline – to ensure that it does not become a marginalised function merely to be used for window-dressing.

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