

Solving PR's Identity Crisis Could Unlock Our Potential

By Matthew S. Zinman, APR

Let's be candid. Fragmentation of the PR profession is worse than ever and practitioners have fallen short in properly educating the constituents who control our professional destiny. Until we achieve consensus about industry representation, our ability to convey our value and create demand for our services will be limited.

One obvious solution to thwart the growing number of PR businesses, departments and associations using alternative monikers is a renewed effort to endorse an industry umbrella term that more accurately represents our modern practices. The terminology issue has not been addressed since 1987 when a PRSA committee agreed to endorse the status quo. That was 12 years ago — one year before the word "spin" entered the mainstream.

There are several reasons why semantics remain important. Solving this identity crisis will help unify our divided profession,

making us more effective in addressing other issues limiting our potential, such as general inertia and the lack of mutual business/PR education and industry leadership. Though our profession has evolved, the term "public relations" continues to be associated with unethical practices. The term is also ambiguously perceived and implies nothing to suggest a planned process or management function.

Last May, in a commentary that appeared in these pages, I suggested "communications management" as an umbrella term to better represent modern PR practices. The semantics issue has advanced since then through limited dialogue. While more is needed, it appears that "communications management" would not achieve industrywide endorsement because the word "communications" with its numerous connotations may be misperceived. There are also many traditionalists who will not abandon the term "public relations," in spite of its many shortcomings. Fortunately, another product of this ongoing dialogue is a moniker that provides greater viability, seamless transition and facilitates compromise — "PR Management." The reaction to this

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new suggestion will likely find conservatives still huffing about why the semantics issue is even important and others who find the change to the "PR" acronym disrespectful in some way.

Ultimately, the goal is to revisit terminology and other key issues in an organized forum with industrywide endorsement and participation. This sanctioned dialogue, a "PR Management Issues Summit," could be an adjunct to the PRSA International Convention in Anaheim this October. Until a formal dialogue becomes more palpable, consider the following reasons why "PR Management" is a viable compromise. Solving our identity crisis will help our modern profession reach its potential.

• Adding "management" to "PR" would provide a common thread to encourage acceptance among practitioners with preferences for terms like, "reputation

management," "relations" or "strategic communications," among others.

• By reducing "public relations" to "PR," the ambiguous term becomes a representational acronym, much like CPA or MIS.

• "PR Management" maintains its connection with our industry origins, but more appropriately, represents the strategic role that defines modern practices as a management function.

• The new term better positions PR curricula, now housed in journalism programs, to transfer to business schools where mutual integration is needed. Some PR programs may also find appropriate homes in independent communications and liberal arts departments.

• Retaining "PR" retains the equity of the APR designation. It also helps provide a natural transition for agencies like mine to use the moniker, "Advertising and PR Management Agency." 🐾



Matthew S. Zinman, APR, is vice president of the Commercial PR Management Services Group at Harris, Balo & McCullough, a full-service advertising and PR management agency in Philadelphia. matt@hbmadv.com