

Reflections of Perceptions: Measuring the Effects Public Relations Education has on Non-majors' Attitudes Toward the Discipline

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This study compares before and after perceptions of the public relations field among a population of nationwide non-major students enrolled in a graduate public relations management course. Results indicate significant decreases regarding how much the media, general public, and practitioners' behavior influence their viewpoints about the profession. Additionally, after completing this course, students' overall impression toward the public relations field significantly increased – as did their perception about how the industry serves the good of the public. These results support the need for continued public relations education among students beyond those who are majoring in public relations.

Introduction

Nearly 40 years ago Rand explained, “I believe public relations to be a very much misunderstood and abused term. Many people who pose as public relations practitioners do not really *do* public relations....” (1969, p. 65). Since that time, the term “public relations” has become somewhat of a euphemism. When someone is caught doing something underhanded, when a disaster strikes, or when someone's ethics are called into question, chances are that two letters will appear: “PR.”

Recently, results from the *2006 State of the Public Relations Profession Opinion Survey*, sponsored by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and Bacon's Information, revealed that the industry's single greatest challenge is to “uphold credibility within an environment where the lines between public relations, advertising and journalism are growing increasingly vague” (p. 6). Further, this report indicated that ethical issues, such as organizational integrity, is rated among the respondents (n=1,493) as one of the most important challenges for the industry (p. 4). Other issues identified in the report include concern for “proliferation of new communication channels” and the rise of “antagonistic communication” (p. 5).

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The public relations industry's image problem is no secret. The term is like a Pandora's box of preconceptions – and misconceptions – in the minds of many. However, “Jane and John Doe Public” are not necessarily to be blamed. Organizations do make poor choices, and the media reports the results of such decisions. Take, for example, the Federal Emergency Management Association's recent decision to stage a fake news conference, which swiftly proliferated among the vast majority of media channels. We cannot fault society for forming inaccurate opinions about the public relations field when they read and hear about these kinds of behaviors. These behaviors assist in the development of negative perceptions formed around our profession's reputation. The purpose of this study is to empirically examine perceptions about the public relations field among “John and Jane Doe Public.” However, these particular Johns and Jane Does are uniquely distinguished from the general population: they *self-selected* – as opposed to being *required* – to enroll in a graduate level public relations management course that provided them with eight weeks of general education about this field.

Literature Review

The saga: defining the public relations profession

Historically, defining the public relations profession has, in itself, been a problem. Scholars and practitioners alike have developed their own definitions of public relations – and those definitions seem to change as the field evolves and grows. Edward Bernays, widely regarded as the “father of public relations,” first described public relations in his seminal book, *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, as “information given to the public, persuasion directed at the public to modify actions and attitudes, and efforts to integrate attitudes and actions of an institution with its public and of publics with those of the institution” (1923, p. 9). Rex Harlow (1977) published results from a study in which he identified nearly 500 *different terms* to define public relations. Harlow also published a carefully-crafted definition:

Public relations is a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound ethical communication techniques as its principal tools” (1976, p. 36).

Hutton (1999) pointed out that public relations has failed to reach an all-encompassing definition. He suggested that in order for the public relations industry to advance and become clearer in the mind of society, colleagues in the profession need to reach some sort of general consensus about the field's definition. Hutton contends that one of the most common criticisms is that definitions are too general and that these definitions inadequately describe public relations' true functions.

Other researchers have contributed to public relations scholarship by studying different ways to philosophically view the profession as it evolves (e.g., Kent & Taylor, 2002; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000; Botan & Soto, 1998; Gordan, 1997; Botan, 1993; Grunig, 1992; Barstow, 1984). During the past few decades, more compressed and commonly accepted public relations definitions have been developed, such as the one by Grunig and Hunt: "management of communication between an organization and its publics" (1984, p. 94). Cutlip, Center, and Broom have also developed a mainstream definition: "the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends" (2000, p. 6).¹

The term: negative connotations and associations

Sumpter and Tankard (1994) discussed "spin doctoring" as an apparent alternative model of public relations. Others, such as Felling (2001), likened public relations firms to "used car dealerships," calling practitioners "spin artists" who transform truths. Yet definitions for public relations have been associated with negative connotations like "spin," "publicity," "lobbying," "damage control" and "propaganda" (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Fall, 2004; Ihator, 1999; Pinsdorf, 1999; Dilenschneider, 1999; Budd, 1997; Fombrun, 1996; Ewen, 1996). Heath suggested that, "in the view of some or any many, public relations is the art of sham, spin, buzz, sandbagging, and 'being nice'" (2004, preface xxiii).

One-third (34%) of respondents who participated in the *Public Relations Profession Opinion Survey* indicated that the media, to include consumer journalists and blogs, are the strongest voice against the industry; another half said that no one group has the strongest voice. And, another two-thirds (64%) report that PRSA, both nationally and at the local chapter levels, should serve as the overarching voice for the profession (p. 5).

Research that focuses on the positioning of the term "public relations" in various contexts provides more evidence of negative undertones associated with the public relations profession (Bishop, 1988; Henderson, 1998; Rhinebeck, 1999; Spicer, 1993). Spicer (1993) reported that these terms were used consistently to suggest manipulation and untruthfulness, which further develops the misconceptions of public relations. With regard to how journalists view public relations professionals, studies by DeLorme and Fedler (2003), Scrimger and Richards (2002), Saunders (1993), Ryan and Martinson (1988), and Aronoff (1975) revealed negative, even sometimes hostile, undertones. In addition, Holmes (2003) noted that journalists use "public relations" and "publicity" interchangeably. Bishop (1988) observed that in more than 16,000 stories from a select group of newspapers, one in three references was made about "PR" while 121 references were made about "publicity." He concluded, "As far as this sample goes, public relations is equated solely with publicity...the lack of recognition for other areas of expertise may account for the distorted view which many have of the field" (1987, p. 52).

Building from Bishop's study, Henderson (1998) used the keyword "public relations" to examine nearly 240 issues of the *The New York Times* from January 1995 to December

1996. She noted that an overwhelming majority of the articles made reference to public relations in an inaccurate and unflattering way. Henderson's study revealed that the term "public relations" was used correctly only about 5% of the time and that in 16% of the cases, public relations was seen as a "negative force in society because it corrupts the channels of communication and the working of democracy" (1998, p. 51). In the same stream of research, Jo (2003) analyzed news stories among several major newspapers and on television, noting that nearly 75% of the news stories represented the term "public relations" in a negative or unfavorable way. The term was often followed by words such as "disaster" and "problem and debacle," thereby heightening the negative connotation of the term.

In the context of entertainment media, Frisina (2003), Miller (1999), Tavcar (1993), and Lee (2001) studied how public relations practitioners were identified in films and found that the characters were often framed negatively and/or misrepresented in comparison to what professionals really do. Other colleagues like Wright (2005), Sallot (2002) and Callison (2004, 2001) addressed how the public views public relations practitioners. Although their results varied, for the most part, their findings were less than enthusiastic with regard to how the industry's image is framed in the marketplace.

Examining perceptions among students

Various studies have been conducted among undergraduate students to measure their perceptions related to a plethora of aspects about the public relations industry. For example, Sha and Toth (2005), Farmer and Waugh (1999), and DeRose and Wilcox (1989) examined gender differences with regard to students' attitudes toward career-related attributes. Also in the framework of gender, Andsager and Hust (2005) surveyed students to determine a gender distinction regarding specialty public relations areas (e.g., tourism, nonprofit, sports, etc.). With regard to curriculum, Gower and Reber (2006) and Sorto (1990) studied students' perceptions toward academic requirements and preparation for their careers in public relations while Fall (2006) measured students' attitudes toward community service and civic engagement (2006). Proctor and Fall (2007) and Bowen (2003) explored students' misconceptions about careers in the public relations industry and Martinson (1981) evaluated students' overall definitions.

More in focus with this study's focus, other studies tested various measures among graduate students. In particular, one study examined graduate students' attitudes toward mergers after engaging in active learning projects related to a particular client (Berger, 2002). A study by Fall (2000) examined graduate students' satisfaction regarding a public relations management course taught by means of a three-weekend accelerated format. Yet another study assessed graduate students' opinions of "big business" after using case study kits to learn about the issue of divestiture of an oil company (Broom, Ferguson-DeThorne & Ruksza, 1980). And Hiscock (2004) examined the development of graduate students' knowledge management awareness via their participation in qualitative field research projects that investigated communication and culture among various organizations. However, when searching for studies that measure perceptions *before* – as well as *after* – students successfully completed some general public relations education

(such as completing an introductory course), only one was found. Botan and Hunt (1988) investigated gender differences, by means of pre- and post-measures, with regard to students' perceptions of competency.

And, after carefully scrutinizing the literature for studies that measure perceptions among a *general* population of students (e.g., those who are not actually majoring in mass media or public relations) who have completed some general public relations education – none such studies were found. Hence, the purpose of the study is to fill that void and to extend our knowledge. As such, this investigation measures perceptions among adult students who have completed some general public relations education via an elective course. The following hypothesis was tested and research questions were addressed in this study:

H1: Scores that measure the overall perception of the public relations field will favorably increase after students have been generally educated.

RQ1: What aspects influence the students' perceptions about the public relations field?

RQ2: How do these aspects influence the students' perceptions about the public relations field?

Method

Selection and sampling of participants

The researchers of this study were afforded a unique opportunity to extend the public relations literature. They received permission to survey a nation-wide group of adult graduate students who were enrolled in a well-established online Masters of Science in Administration offered via a mid-sized university, which is accredited by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. This online graduate program does not offer a major in mass media or public relations program. As such, these students chose to enroll in public relations management class as one of their required elective courses.

The sampling frame consisted of 465 graduate students who had enrolled in the public relations management course between January 2004 and March 2007. For validity purposes, continuity was key to this study. While enrolled in the course, the students all had the same instructor, the same online curriculum, the same course assignments, the same grading scale, and the same required textbook (*Effective Public Relations* by Cutlip, Center, & Broom).

The researchers chose to include all students in the study as opposed to employing random sampling procedures for three reasons. First, since the graduate program the students were enrolled in was offered completely online, the sample offered an opportunity to study students from all over the country. Second, when researchers reduce the potential sample size for the sake of randomization, coupled with the issue of typical non-

responses, there is the risk of a diminished final sample size with less variance and, ultimately, less robust data to examine. Third, although the researchers had access to mailing addresses from when the students were previously enrolled in the course, there was a possibility that the addresses were not current (e.g., the students had moved) at the time the study was launched; this inherently could hinder the response rate. Hence, for this study, the pursuit to obtain information that is helpful to broadening the public relations literature outweighs the argument for randomized sampling. The researchers decided that the skew created by the self-selecting method was offset by the need to increase the overall response rate.

Instrumentation and administrative procedures

This study employed a self-administered survey method. A three-page questionnaire served as the instrument. The questionnaire was sent via U.S. mail after students had successfully completed the public relations management course. Prior to launching the survey, the questionnaire was pre-tested among 32 people who were not part of the sample to assess how long it would take someone to complete the questionnaire and to provide the researchers with feedback about the clarity of the content. Minor revisions were then made.

One month before sending the actual survey, the entire sample received a postcard to let them know the survey was forthcoming. Postcards “returned to sender” with no forwarding addresses were removed from the final database. The address database was updated and the actual questionnaire was sent three weeks later. Accompanying the questionnaire was a self-addressed stamped envelope. The cover letter explained the purpose of the study and revealed the institutions sponsoring the study. Additionally, this letter clearly instructed students to think about what they had learned while enrolled in the public relations management course and to use this information when comparing their individual perceptions of the public relations field before and after taking the class. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured and the opportunity to decline participation in the study was provided.

Operationalism of the variables

In this study, the term “generally educated” is operationalized as follows: successfully passing (earning a grade of “C” or better) in *Public Relations Management*, an eight-week online three credit graduate level course. Three categories of variables were used in this study to measure perceptions about the public relations industry, two of which were quantitative and one that was qualitative. The first quantitative perception category consisted of a single statement that asked participants to rate their overall perception of the public relations field *before* enrolling in the public relations management course. The same statement was repeated later in the survey and asked participants to rate their *current* overall perception of the public relations field – now that they had completed the course. The rating consisted of a 1-5 Likert-type scale where 1= very negative, 3=neutral, and 5=very positive.

The second quantitative perception category consisted of variables that measured various aspects about the public relations industry. Statements derived from various introductory public relations textbooks served as the measures for these variables.² Participants were asked to rate these statements based on their perceptions they had toward the field *before* enrolling in the public relations management course. The same statements were repeated later in the survey and asked participants to rate their *current* perceptions of the public relations field – now that they had completed the course. The same 1-5 Likert-type scale was used, where 1= very negative, 3=neutral, and 5=very positive.

The third qualitative category consisted of an open-ended question that asked respondents to write in other comments explaining why they perceive that the public relations industry may or may not be misunderstood. Respondents were also asked to provide basic demographic characteristics, including race, age, state of residence and academic program in which they had earned their undergraduate degree. Also, they were asked to indicate if they had ever been employed, or were currently employed, in public relations field.

Results

Profile of respondents

A total of 465 surveys were mailed; 57 (13%) were returned as undeliverable, diminishing the sample size to 408. The final number of respondents totaled 106, resulting in a 26% response rate. Respondents from 30 different states and the District of Columbia are represented in this study. The sample is relatively gender-balanced: 56% are female and 44% are male. Ages range from 26 to 62; the average age of respondents is 41. Nearly two-thirds of respondents are Caucasian (64%) followed by Afro-Americans (28%), and other (8%), which is reflective of this university's racial profile of its online students. Undergraduate degrees vary; nearly half (46%) have undergraduate degrees in Business, another 18% have degrees in Social Sciences, and the remainder (36%) represent "other" degrees, ranging from Communication, Health and Education to Engineering and Political Science. The majority (95%) of respondents have not worked in the public relations field.

Addressing the hypothesis

The single hypothesis tested in this study predicted that scores measuring the overall perception of the public relations field will favorably increase after students have been generally educated. Note: the authors acknowledge that fact that is not a "traditional" pre-test, post-test study; students were asked to compare their past perceptions about the public relations field to their present perceptions *after* having successfully completed the public relations management course. In a traditional pre-test, post-test examination these students would have been asked to provide this information *before* enrolling in the course – then *after* completing the course.

Results from the paired sample t-test indicate a significant increase in means regarding students' overall perception of the public *before* ($\mu=2.9$) versus *after* ($\mu=4.1$) they had been generally educated: $t(86) = -10.9, p < .000$. Therefore, H1 is supported.

Addressing the research questions

To address the first two research questions, which examined various aspects that influence the students' perceptions about the public relations field, three analyses took place. First, scores from the nine statements used to measure influence were submitted to a paired sample t-test. Seven of the nine statements indicate a positive mean score difference. Second, frequency scores were compared: only 20% of the students *initially* rated the public relations field positively (e.g., a rating of "4" or "5") while 82% rated the field positively *after* completing the course. (See tables 1-4)

Table 1: *Recap of t-test results (before and after comparisons)*

	Significance and direction	Statements Being Measured
Pair 1	Sign decrease	#1. The media influences my perceptions about public relations.
Pair 2	N/S	#2. Practitioner behavior influences my perceptions about public relations.
Pair 3	Sign. Decrease	#3. The general public influences my perceptions about public relations.
Pair 4	Sign. Increase	#4. I believe that society views public relations practitioners in a positive light.
Pair 5	Sign. Decrease	#5. Public relations is more reactive than proactive.
Pair 6	Sign. Increase	#6. Most public relations practitioners serve the good of the public.
Pair 6	Sign. Increase	#7. The public relations industry does a good job of promoting its positive qualities.
Pair 8	Sign. Decrease	#8. Public relations is seen by many as a "less than ethical" profession.
Pair 9	N/S	#9. Work needs to be done to improve society's perception of public relations industry.

Table 2: Paired samples t-test (before vs. after general education took place)

		Paired Differences			95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Q2a - Q4a	.6792	1.1996	.1165	.4482	.9103	5.830	105	.000
Pair 2	Q2b - Q4b	.0472	1.0635	.1033	-.1577	.2520	.457	105	.649
Pair 3	Q2c - Q4c	.4151	1.1370	.1104	.1961	.6341	3.759	105	.000
Pair 4	Q2d - Q4d	-.264	1.063	.103	-.469	-.059	-2.559	105	.012
Pair 5	Q2e - Q4e	.692	1.428	.140	.415	.970	4.943	103	.000
Pair 6	Q2f - Q4f	-.728	.962	.095	-.916	-.540	-7.682	102	.000
Pair 7	Q2g - Q4g	-.317	1.082	.106	-.528	-.107	-2.991	103	.003
Pair 8	Q2h - Q4h	.365	1.124	.110	.147	.584	3.315	103	.001
Pair 9	Q2i - Q4i	.000	.930	.091	-.180	.180	.000	104	1.000

Table 3: Overall perception before education

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	2.0	24	22.6	24.0	24.0
	3.0	56	52.8	56.0	80.0
	4.0	16	15.1	16.0	96.0
	5.0	4	3.8	4.0	100.0
	Total	100	94.3	100.0	
Missing	99.0	6	5.7		
Total		106	100.0		

Table 4: Overall perception after education

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	2	2	1.9	2.2
	3	15	14.2	16.3
	4	46	43.4	50.0
	5	29	27.4	31.5
	Total	92	86.8	100.0
Missin	99	14	13.2	
g				
Total		106	100.0	

For the third analysis, data were submitted to a linear regression analysis. Two sets of scores were tested: those that reflect perceptions *before* the students completed the course and those that reflect perceptions *after* completing the course. The single statement that measured **overall** perception was entered as the dependent variable; the nine statements that measure specific aspects were entered as independent variables.

When calculating results for scores that reflect students' perceptions *before* completing the course, the overall model explained 22% of the variance. The variables that significantly influence this model include statements #3 ($\beta = -.287, p = .007$), #6 ($\beta = .247, p = .052$) and #9 ($\beta = -.234, p = .050$), as shown in table 5. When calculating results for scores that reflect students' perceptions *after* completing the course, the overall model increased by 4% -- now explaining nearly 26% of the variance. The variable significantly influencing this model is represented by statement #4 ($\beta = .308, p = .013$); however, statements #6 ($\beta = .199, p = .084$) and #8 ($\beta = -.201, p = .090$) are nearing significance, as shown in table 6

Table 5: *Linear regression results before education*

Statements	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	2.370	.709		3.340	.001
1 Media Influences my perceptions about the public relations industry	.074	.091	.084	.810	.420
2 Practitioner behavior Influences my perceptions...	.042	.082	.051	.511	.611
3 General Public Influences my perceptions...	-.251	.091	-.287	-2.777	.007
4 Society view public relations in positive light	.167	.122	.173	1.377	.172
5 Public relations industry is more reactive than proactive	.073	.082	.090	.895	.373
6 Public relations practitioners serve good of the public	.218	.111	.247	1.970	.052
7 Industry does a good job promoting its positive qualities	.011	.086	.014	.126	.900
8 Industry is seen by many as a "less than ethical" profession	.136	.088	.177	1.549	.125
9 Work needs to be done to improve public's overall perception of the public relations industry	-.211	.106	-.234	-1.987	.050

Table 6: *Linear regression results after education*

Statements	Unstandardized		Standardized	T	Sig.
	Coefficients	Coefficients			
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	3.279	.663		4.948	.000
1 Media Influences my perceptions about the public relations industry	-.059	.077	-.099	-.761	.449
2 Practitioner behavior Influences my perceptions...	.036	.076	.051	.472	.638
3 General Public Influences my perceptions...	-.065	.091	-.096	-.716	.476
4 Society view public relations in positive light	.236	.093	.308	2.535	.013
5 Public relations industry is more reactive than proactive	-.026	.066	-.043	-.401	.690
6 Public relations practitioners serve good of the public	.162	.093	.199	1.748	.084
7 Industry does a good job promoting its positive qualities	-.067	.077	-.105	-.870	.387
8 Industry is seen by many as a "less than ethical" profession	-.177	.103	-.201	-1.717	.090
9 Work needs to be done to improve public's overall perception of the public relations industry	.151	.101	.166	1.499	.138

Discussion

Overarching conclusions

Three overarching conclusions can be drawn from this study. First and foremost, results indicate that overall perceptions about the public relations industry are significantly more favorable *after* respondents had participated in general education about the public relations field. As such, continued education about our profession is critical. Second, this study indicates that the media and practitioners themselves serve as two dominant forces that influence the perceptions these respondents have about the public relations field. Third, two themes were prevalent: 1) people appear to associate overall negative connotations with the public relations industry and 2) people are uninformed – or misinformed – regarding what public relations practitioners really do. This was clearly

demonstrated by the mean scores results and further supported by the open-ended answers revealed in this study.

Educating people about an issue (or, in this case, a profession) can “move the needle.” These results come as no surprise. But what is even more central to the contributions of this study’s findings is the identification of *which aspects* influenced the needle’s movement – and in which *direction* the needle moved. In short, these results demonstrate how being educated, and otherwise informed, can augment the good and diminish the bad.

Knowledge is power

Two other findings are noteworthy and warrant further comment. After completing the graduate public relations management course, there was a significant *increase* in respondents’ mean scores regarding the statement that measures how they perceive public relations practitioners “serving the good of the public,” coupled with a significant *decrease* in their perception of the industry being “a less than ethical profession.” Also, there was a significant *decrease* concerning how the general public influences respondents’ perceptions about the field. In fact, this was the measure where the most dramatic frequency score shift was found. Said another way, after being educated, respondents were more apt to make their own decisions and form their own perceptions about the public relations field instead of letting society influence their judgment.

These results provide evidence to substantiate continued support for a universal information campaign that educates people with regard to what the public relations industry is – and what it contributes to society. These results uphold the adage, “knowledge is power.” As Coombs and Holladay (2007) point out,

“Whether we like it or not, people will continue attempts to manage mutual influence. Public relations is a natural and necessary function in society. What is important to understand is how public relations can shape our lives. *Knowledge is power*. By understanding how public relations works we are better able to resist those efforts when need be and to use those same tactics to improve the quality of life for ourselves and others” (p. 126).

As such, these researchers contend that people who are informed and educated about the public relations field serve as our strongest allies. Having completed this graduate level public relations management course, all of these students now represent viable advocates for our field. Consider the “multiplier effect” as it relates to communication. If each student in the sample (n=106) who enrolled in the course told two friends about what public relations is and how it positively contributes to society, potentially another 212 people can become more accurately informed about our profession. Now apply this multiplier effect in its broadest terms by taking into consideration that hundreds of universities throughout the United States and abroad offer formal public relations programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The good news is that these word-of-mouth advocates can continue to strengthen our field.

Big brother – and sister – is watching us

Practitioner behavior is a concern that cannot be ignored either, as indicated by results from this study. Both before and after the participants were educated, more than half of the respondents reported that the way others in the industry behave significantly influences their perceptions. This implies that, whether our behaviors are positive or negative, we are being watched. As one participant noted, “Practitioners tend to neglect their purpose and perform their business in a manner that is negatively perceived by the public at large.” A significant decrease in the mean scores regarding the statement, “Public relations is more reactive than proactive,” is also important to the goal of this study. These findings demonstrate that education helped respondents to better understand that public relations practitioners do not just *react* after the fact but are in fact *proactive* and strategic. Yet, we cannot control others’ behavior. Coombs and Holladay (2007) make a poignant statement about this concern: “Public relations is much like the law; some will use it to hurt others while others will use it to benefit society. It is misguided to assume that public relations is inherently unethical or inherently ethical. Ultimately, public relations is as ethical as the people employing it” (p. 126).

Media continues to play a dominant role

This study substantiates the point that media’s framing of the public relations industry continues to play a dominant role in shaping the image of our profession. Nearly three-fourths of participants in this study noted that the media was one of the main factors that shaped their perceptions *before* being trained and nearly half reported the same *after* being trained. As one participant noted, “I feel that the main reason is that most of society’s perceptions of the public relations industry are formulated by the experiences that they witness in the media.” However, there was a significant mean decrease in agreement about the media’s influence *after* being trained. These results indicate that by undergoing some general education, respondents became more aware of how the media can frame information. General education provided them with tools to become savvier consumers when assessing news content.

Recommendations

Even though this profession has played an active role in the marketplace, arguably, for more than a century, we must continue our quest to provide “public relations” for the public relations industry. Results from this study beg the question: “What can be done?” The answer can be summed up in one word: education. Obviously, we do not have the luxury of engaging society in one large classroom for weekly public relations management education sessions. However, as a discipline, both among the academic and professional community, we need to continue our commitment to educate others about what we do.

Limitations of the study

One of the limitations of this study was addressed early on. Since the researchers opted to survey the entire sample instead of employing random sampling, the results are

not generalizable to all graduate students. However, this issue is actually a moot point – because the results can only be generalized to the single university from which the sample was derived. This leads to another limitation. The respondents under investigation represented only one university. In order to gain a better understanding as to how these results may apply to other professionals, graduate students at other universities who are enrolled in varying programs should be studied. Another limitation is that this study measures pre-and post-perceptions after the fact, so the issue of information recall is acknowledged. And, as pointed out, this study does not employ a traditional “pre-and post” design.

Suggestions for future research

This study asked participants to respond after the class was completed. Future studies should employ traditional pre- and post measures (e.g., before the class starts, then after it ends) among students to more precisely gauge how perceptions have shifted upon completion of some general public relations education. Also, studying perceptions among students enrolled in other graduate programs (e.g., marketing, human resource management, etc.) will enable us to continue to broaden our knowledge of how students in other disciplines perceive our field. This is especially important in light of the fact some of them seek employment in the public relations industry upon graduation – even though they are not formally educated for this profession.

Final thoughts

As public relations professionals, we are uniquely positioned and qualified to enhance our own industry’s reputation. We have specialized skills and a uniquely broad vantage point from which to provide guidance and advice that is critical to the success of the myriad publics we serve, the society at large, and our profession. We close with words of wisdom by Robert Heath, a distinguished public relations scholar: *“It [public relations] is here to stay. It serves society best by asking more and more of itself...Onward into the fog – but perhaps with a lantern to lead”* (2004, preface xxvii).

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Footnotes

¹The authors acknowledge the fact that a plethora of prominent public relations textbooks exist – as do varying public relations definitions. However, it was beyond the scope of this study to list them all.

²One of the authors of this study has been teaching this particular course since 1998. During this 10-year period, the researcher has received more than 200 end-of term evaluation comments expressing that the course material has provided positive “eye-opening” information about the public relations field – which prompted the initial idea for the study.