

## THE PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSIONAL. ELEMENTS OF IDENTITY

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**Abstract:** As public relations have gained notoriety, the PR professional is becoming more and more part of our everyday lives. However, even if the public gets familiar with the terms public relations and public relations specialists, many people do not know what type of activities these professionals are supposed to do or what knowledge and skills they are expected to master in order to become successful at their jobs. Therefore, in this article we shall highlight the qualities, personality traits and specific competencies a public relations professional should have, based on the PR practitioner's profile portrayed in the specialized literature.

**Key words:** public relations, PR practitioner, professional competencies, personal qualities.

### 1. Introduction

The term "professional" has become unclear due to overuse, misunderstanding and improper association. Today, any specialist in any domain is seen as a professional. We are talking about professional stylists, about professional models, professional salesmen, professional consultants, professional engineers, professional cosmetologists, professional tennis/ golf/ boxing/ hockey /poker players etc.

In the case of public relations, as it happens in other domains, portraying a professional depends on the identification of professional competencies, consisting of knowledge and skills specific to each domain and transversal competences that involve skills which transcend a particular field being applied in various professional contexts. The profile of a public relations specialist has preoccupied many researchers (Bernays 1923, Black 2002, Coman 2008, Balaban 2009, Szyszka 2009, Wilcox 2009, Cutlip 2010, Palea 2013). The bibliographical study reveals particular attention given to transversal competencies and personal characteristics/ personality traits in shaping the profile of the PR practitioner.

In this article we shall highlight elements of identity of a public relations specialist based on literature: books and guides, scientific articles on the competences/ attributes/ skills required by a PR specialist and self-reflexive discourse of practitioners in the field.

### 2. Competences, aptitudes, personal qualities of a PR practitioner

Caroline Black believes that what is "certainly true of public relations specialists is that many professional skills are developed based on personal qualities" (Black 2003: 21). According to the author, the personal qualities of an effective public relations practitioner are:

- Good communicator;
- With a sense of humor;

- Calm under pressure;
- Creative;
- Organized;
- Willing to learn;
- Curious;
- Warm/approachable/down to earth;
- Confident;
- Focused;
- Practical;
- Energetic;
- Enthusiastic;
- Assertive;
- Tough;
- Integrity (Black 2003: 21-25).

Caroline Black has put together a list of professional skills an effective PR practitioner should master: public relations essentials, planning and evaluation skills, writing skills, presentation skills, media relations skills, consulting skills, client handling skills, issues and crisis management, reputation management, budget management and profitability, knowledge of IT and e- communications, specialist sector skills, business strategy and marketing skills (Black 2003: 25-28). We note that the author puts emphasis on management skills, indirectly suggesting the place public relations should hold in an organization.

The Classification of Occupations in Romania (2013) lists the following responsibilities for public relations specialists:

- Create and manage the public image of institutions, companies, political parties and organizations, NGOs etc. ;
- mediate conflicts and consult for negotiations;
- manage the organization's relationship with the media as spokesmen or officials in the press office;
- produce written and audio-visual messages;
- organize media events (press conferences, exhibitions, releases of goods and services, etc.)

This list captures the variety of responsibilities of PR professionals, who must possess a broad range of skills and abilities in order to fulfil their tasks.

Richard Edeleman, a prominent public relations man, captures similar qualities necessary for success in public relations. In his opinion, a good practitioner should have a lot of energy, think positively and have a sense of humor (2002: 115). He also mentions curiosity and a deep sensitivity as essential characteristics for individual success.

Dennis Wilcox (2009: 84) presents some fundamental personal attributes, obvious to all successful practitioners, regardless of their specific duties. These are:

- Ability of skilfully use written or spoken words;
- Analytical capacity for the identification and definition of problems;
- Creativity, to find new and effective solutions to every problem;
- Power of persuasion;
- Ability to deliver appealing and stylish presentations.

Trevor Morris and Simon Goldsworthy (2008: 88) consider that what brings public relations specialists closer together, are not primarily demographic issues, but their personality. The two authors, quoting Jackall and Hirota, list seven characteristics of a successful practitioner:

- Ability to maintain pleasant and intelligent conversations customers (clever casual conversations);
- Acceptance elegant to be in the spotlight;
- Talent to think realistically / to be grounded;
- Willingness to shine / to be charming presentations to customers;
- Ability to create mystery about the creative process;
- To know when to switch to rational discourse;
- Enthusiasm.

The authors noted that even if not all PR people have all of these characteristics, most of them do. It is also important to observe how few other fields of knowledge requires this mix of knowledge and abilities.

The list of personality traits necessary for success in public relations drawn by Bill Cantor comprises: reaction to stress, personal initiative, curiosity and learning, energy, determination and ambition, objective thinking, flexible attitude, in the service of others, friendliness, versatility, lack of selfishness (Cutlip 2010: 55). Lack of selfishness is part of a series of features that help shape ethical behavior of a practitioner. A selfless person will most likely be concerned with the welfare of others, public interest, support for ideas or projects that go beyond immediate self-interest. A practitioner who guides his/her work by these principles "preserves his integrity, the essential quality for building a successful career" (Lazăr 2013).

John Trader (2013) writes for PR Daily article about five essential traits for a successful PR professional: thick skin, ambition and power to overcome obstacles, attention to detail, creativity, and ability to build relationships.

In addition to these personality traits, researchers also refer to some specific knowledge. For Bernard Dagenais (2002: 84-90) they consist of:

- Knowledge of the organization;
- Knowledge of the public;
- Knowledge of the environment;
- Knowledge of research techniques.

The same author draws attention to the skills and competencies necessary to the PR practitioner during crises, as he often finds himself in the front line and has to manage, under the influence of stress, lots of activities and decisions: taking attitude, seeking causes of the crisis, tips for the management, provisions or criticisms to be made known to the customers.

Gheorghe – Ilie Fârte (2009: 63) presents as necessary the following "skills": the use of sociological research methods, information management, efficient use of language in communication both written and oral communication, negotiation and mediation, communication management, strategic planning, issues management, segmenting audiences, informative and persuasive writing, community relations management, customer relations and employee relations, the use of new communication technologies, development of audio-visual materials, project management and human resources, interpersonal empathy, mastery of foreign languages, ability to make ethical decisions, participation in professional public

relations associations, production of messages, current problem solving under stress, mastery of rhetorical processes in public communication, sparing intercultural sensitivity and gender etc. .

Gheorghe-Ilie Fârte (2009: 71) presents an overview of the functions performed by public relations specialists contrasting what they can and cannot do:

Public relations practitioners can:	Public relations practitioners cannot:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ help achieve business goals</li> <li>➤ explain strategies, programs and policies</li> <li>➤ increase visibility in the public sphere</li> <li>➤ attract attention to public issues</li> <li>➤ encourage debate and informed discussions</li> <li>➤ help change perceptions, opinions and behaviors</li> <li>➤ influence attitudes</li> <li>➤ motivate staff</li> <li>➤ contribute to the implementation of marketing strategies to increase sales</li> <li>➤ contribute to growing public reputation</li> <li>➤ help regain credibility</li> <li>➤ influence the values of a social group or society as a whole</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ lend credibility unless the source, content and method of presentation are credible</li> <li>➤ fulfil the duties of marketing and advertising specialists</li> <li>➤ build reputations overnight</li> <li>➤ support an undeserved reputation</li> <li>➤ compensate for the lack of quality products or services</li> <li>➤ justify a bad policy</li> <li>➤ turn a bad policy into a good one</li> </ul>

**Table 1.** Functions of public relations specialists

### 3. The Public Relations Specialist - elements of identity

In an investigation coordinated by Cristina Coman (2008: 83-99) in 2007, Isabela Liutic conducted a gender analysis of specialists in the field. Out of the 185 questionnaires sent, she received answers to 70 and, in addition, she conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 professionals. Most professionals under analysis worked in private firms, were aged 20-30 years and fulfilled tasks as copywriter, project assistant, information and communication advisor, communication referent, PR coordinator, account manager, brand manager, etc. – titles which show a still uncertain vocabulary regarding function names within departments and firms. The research shows that 75% of these women skilled in public relations have a diploma in the domain and that only 25% have a degree in other fields (economic, philological or social sciences). 47% were working in these companies due to "a favorable context", 35 % because "they wanted it", 13% for having participated in job interviews and 5% by chance. Respondents argue that they needed professional development courses (73%), especially in areas such as Brand Management, Project Management, and Internal Communication. However, the majority (85%) adhere to the widespread stereotype of the guild that experience is more important than knowledge gained in an academic environment.

Referring to the skills of practitioners, Scott Cutlip distinguishes between the communication technician, who represents the beginners' level, and expert advisor.

The author shows that in this posture, the communication technician "should explain to employees and media the management's new policies or decisions, most often without knowing the original motivation or expected results" (2010: 43). While practitioners who serve as experts are considered by others "an authority in identifying public relations problems and solutions" (2010: 46). Surveys among public relations executives show that they believe that communication skills, knowledge of media and management, problem solving skills, motivation and intellectual curiosity are necessary for success (2010: 54).

Analyzing the characteristics and skills mentioned above and noting that researchers' focus is not on specific skills practitioners should develop, but transferable skills and qualities to other domains are rather presented, we can say that without a better understanding of the domain and the skills required of those who act as PR experts, "the stereotype widespread within the guild according to which experience is more important than knowledge gained in academic environment" (Coman 2008: 89) has some justification.

The relationship between school, culture and the success of a public relations specialist is underlined by Katie Milo et al. in one of the first books about public relations translated in Romanian. They state that the profession of public relations "is largely dependent on the personality of the person involved" (1998: 22), but that the completion of several disciplines (other than the specialized ones) is required. We list some of the subject titles, which the authors consider necessary: documentation and information techniques, human rights and bioethics, history of Romania, public law, foreign languages, information management, means of communication, rhetoric and public presentation, sociology, games and bargaining theory, computer use.

A recent research about the public relations professional in Romania (Palea 2013: 144), which investigates the identity of a PR specialist as seen by the guild, shows that PR practitioners consider the linguistic competencies as most important for young professionals (38,10%). Transversal competencies (16,67%) and personality traits (16,67%) are also rated as key to a successful career, while professional competencies are presented to be most important in just 26,19% of responses. Based on the quantitative research, Palea (2013: 146) concludes that being communicative and organized are the most important attributes of a PR specialist. Curious, charismatic and willing to learn also appear to be highly valued attributes in the eyes of the respondents.

Aside from all the above mentioned traits and competencies, the identity of a PR professional is also shaped by his/her ethical behaviour. However, ethics seems to be neglected when defining the domain (Horja 2012) and transparency is observed only "in most situations" by the majority of respondents (Palea 2013: 148).

Therefore, the public relations specialist proves to be a complex person whose ideal profile cumulates a wide range of knowledge and abilities. We note that the professionalism of public relations specialist is based on a complex formula that combines transversal competences with personality traits and specific expertise. Analyzing the descriptions extracted from the specialized literature, the emphasis on certain native qualities of practitioners becomes obvious. Nevertheless the trend highlights a growing interest for PR professionals with theoretical knowledge, as graduate courses in PR become compulsory for more and more jobs in the field.

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