



# Teaching Public Relations

Published by the Public Relations Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. Edited by Professor Todd Hunt, Rutgers University

No. 26, March 1992

## Sequence Heads Support Use of Research

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Over the past several years the appeal to public relations practitioners to place greater emphasis on research has become almost a rallying cry in some circles. Newsom, Scott and Turk, for example, argue that "in order to describe what **is** happening or **has** happened or what **might** happen to your organization or its publics, you need to use research techniques."<sup>(1)</sup>

Many practitioners, however, appear to ignore the plea. Grunig -- in a quote that has assumed a special place in public relations lore -- perhaps phrased it best when he said:

Lately, I have begun to feel more and more like the fundamentalist minister railing against sin; the difference being that I have railed **for** evaluation. Just as everyone is against sin, so most public relations people I talk to are for evaluation. People keep on sinning, however, and PR people continue not to do evaluation research.<sup>(2)</sup>

One recent study that surveyed corporate public relations persons who were members of the Public Relations Society of America found that "practitioners substantially agree that public relations persons must understand and know how to use social science techniques, and they substantially agree that knowledge of social science research techniques is a major component of public relations professionalism "<sup>(3)</sup>

Unfortunately, results from that same study again found indications "that practitioners engage in considerably more talk than action when it comes to using social science research techniques."<sup>(4)</sup> More than one-third of the corporate practitioners responding said they "seldom" or "never" used research techniques, and more than one-half said they used them only "occasionally." The authors suggest "practitioners apparently praise research because their corporate and public relations cultures demand it. But the cultures apparently do not demand completed research studies when campaigns are developed, implemented and evaluated."<sup>(5)</sup>

If practitioners are ever going to accept **and utilize** social science research methods as an integral part of all public relations efforts -- and not simply as rhetorical fodder -- faculty in public relations sequences must play a key role. If faculty members emphasize the importance of social science research methods to the ultimate success of all public relations efforts, students may take that "message" into the "real world" and public relations will, in fact, be moving down the road toward reaching a level where **genuine** analysis and evaluation takes the places of "hunches" and "gut feelings" when responding to sometimes complex communication dilemmas.

But do faculty in public relations sequences think it is important that practitioners have a grasp of social science research techniques -- particularly quantitative methods? To help find the answer, a questionnaire was sent to the public relations sequence head of each of the 116 institutions in the *1990 AEJMC Directory* listing public relations available as an option to students.

Each sequence head was sent a questionnaire that included the 12 items in Table I. The first 10 items were identical to those used in the earlier study of corporate practitioners. Each item was followed by a 7-point Likert type scale where the respondent could register his/her agreement/disagreement with each item.<sup>(6)</sup> After two mailings, 81 questionnaires were returned for a final response rate of 70 percent.

Because of the nature of the study, it was important to provide several basic definitions. Social research methods were defined as quantitative research techniques applied to public relations problems. Respondents were told that some, but not all, of those techniques would include: probability sampling, statistical analysis, hypothesis testing, survey research design, experimental design, data interpretation and data presentation.

To "understand" or "have knowledge about" social science methods was defined as meaning a practitioner has (1) an appreciation for social science techniques and (2) a general idea of their importance and application in public relations. The practitioner has no detailed knowledge about research techniques, and he/she is unable to interpret research without expert help.

To "use" social science methods was defined as meaning a practitioner has some detailed knowledge about social science research techniques but not enough to conduct a research study without expert help. The practitioner is able to interpret and to use research data.

To "conduct" research meant a practitioner has substantial knowledge about social science research techniques and is able to conduct research and to interpret research data without help.

**Table 1: Mean Scores**

Note: A "1" on the original scale represented "strongly agree," while a "7" represented "strongly disagree." Therefore, the smaller means in this table represent greater agreement with the items than the larger means. A "4" indicates a neutral response.

1	Practitioners who cannot <b>understand</b> social science research techniques do not serve clients and employers as well as those who can.	<b>1.90</b>
2	Practitioners who cannot <b>use</b> social science research techniques do not serve clients and employers as well as those who can.	<b>2.30</b>
3	Practitioners who cannot <b>conduct</b> social science studies do not serve clients and employers as well as those who can.	<b>3.33</b>
4	Practitioners cannot call themselves professionals if they do not at least <b>understand</b> social science research techniques.	<b>2.45</b>

5	Practical public relations experience makes up for a lack of knowledge about social science research techniques.	<b>4.98</b>
6	Practitioners who <b>cannot use</b> social science research data cannot know how effective their communication efforts are.	<b>2.81</b>
7	Practitioners who do not incorporate social science methods into their public relations programs risk wasting money because they are likely to misread situations with which they work.	<b>2.41</b>
8	Practitioners who <b>don't use</b> social science research as part of their public relations programs cannot adequately show clients or employers the value of their work.	<b>2.80</b>
9	Practitioners who <b>don't use</b> social science research as part of their public relations programs cannot assess the accuracy of their interpretations of public opinion.	<b>2.46</b>
10	The benefits of good social science research to a public relations program outweigh the costs of generating that research.	<b>2.33</b>
11	An undergraduate public relations curriculum should require a course in social science research methods.	<b>1.88</b>
12	An undergraduate public relations curriculum should require a course in statistics.	<b>2.90</b>

The data in Table I show that heads of public relations sequences clearly believe that social science research is important to public relations. Respondents agreed, for example, that practitioners who do not understand, cannot use, or cannot conduct social science research studies do not serve clients and employers as well as those who can. (Items 1,2,3). Respondents felt it most important that practitioners at least understand social science research techniques. Apparently they believe the practitioner can hire someone to actually conduct the research -- as indicated by the almost neutral response to Item 3 -- as long as s/he at least has some understanding of those techniques.

Moving towards **genuine** professionalism is an important goal in the eyes of many public relations practitioners. Respondents to this survey believe that practitioners cannot call themselves professionals if they do not at least understand social science research techniques (Item 4). They also agree that

practitioners who do not use social science research risk wasting money (Item 7) and cannot adequately show clients or employers the value of their work (Item 8). Further, they believe an undergraduate curriculum should **require** a course in social science research methods (Item 11) and statistics (Item 12), although support for the statistics course was not as great.

In fact, respondents agreed with every statement where such agreement would indicate support for the use of social science research methods in public relations. The only item to which they disagreed (Item 5 -- practical public relations experience makes up for a lack of knowledge about social science research techniques), was the only statement where support for social science research called for a negative response.

As might be expected, sequence heads who held the doctorate had mean scores which indicated somewhat stronger support for incorporating social science research into all phases of public relations than those whose highest degree was the masters or bachelors. It must be emphasized, however, that the mean scores for both groups were always on the same side of the agree/disagree continuum.

Even more noteworthy, were the responses to Item 5 -- practical public relations experience makes up for a lack of knowledge about social science research techniques. The mean for corporate practitioners to the earlier study showed very slight agreement with that statement. This study of sequence heads showed overall disagreement (mean=4.98), with the strongest disagreement (mean=5.36) coming from those who had 15 or more years full-time public relations experience! Educators appear to agree that social science research is important to public relations even when those educators have considerable professional experience.

In sum, the results of this survey may be somewhat reassuring for those who hope to see the reality of public relations one day match the rhetoric where research and evaluation are concerned. Nevertheless, caution is still in order. While public relations sequence heads may recognize the importance of social science research methods, that recognition does not necessarily translate into action.

Previous research indicates that younger practitioners are not more committed to using social science research methods than are their older counterparts. If younger practitioners -- at least some of whom one would expect had been "exposed" to instruction touching upon the importance of research in public relations -- fail to incorporate that knowledge into their efforts, one must ask if research and evaluation will ever be **widely and genuinely** incorporated -- as differentiated from widely paid "lip service."

Anyone who has taught a course in public relations where the subject of research is discussed probably can relate to stories of students acknowledging that all this talk about research and evaluation sounds great in the classroom -- while making it dear that they don't believe it will be important once they are out in the "real world."

Many students still are infected with the belief that public relations consists of "telling the company side of the story" and carrying out the wishes of management regardless of what the public may think. Until students are first convinced that public relations practitioners are more than errand boys/ girls for that organization or client employing them, it is doubtful that they will fully appreciate the important role social science research methods can/must serve in supporting almost everything the contemporary public relations practitioner **should** be doing.

The results of this study point to several avenues where further research should/must be directed. Public relations sequence heads say that social science methods are important. Other studies indicate practitioners in the field aren't incorporating them into all their campaigns. It would appear, therefore, that three critical questions need to be addressed:

1. Do most faculty members believe social science research methods are important to public relations and is that translated into an important component of the courses they teach?
  2. Do students who graduate with a "major" in public relations **genuinely** comprehend the role research and evaluation must play or do they "cling" to their stereotypes of the practitioner as being someone who "likes people" despite all efforts to the contrary?
  3. Do students who "major" in public relations, in fact, graduate with an appreciation for the importance of social science research, but subsequently find themselves discouraged -- at least implicitly -- from incorporating such methods by superiors who are not supportive -- or willing to pay -- for good social science research?
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### Endnotes

1. Doug Newsom, Alan Scott and Judy VanSlyke Turk, *This Is PR: The Realities of Public Relations*, 4th ed. (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1989), 109.
  2. James E. Grunig, "Basic Research Provides Knowledge That Makes Evaluation Possible," *Public Relations Quarterly* 28 (1983): 29.
  3. Michael Ryan and David L. Martinson, "Social Science Research, Professionalism and Public Relations Practitioners," *Journalism Quarterly* 67 (Summer 1990): 389.
  4. *Ibid.*
  5. David L. Martinson and Michael Ryan, "Use of Research and Theory in One-way, Two-way Public Relations Environments," *Southwestern Mass Communication Journal*, in press.
  6. The 12 items referred to here made up only one section of the questionnaire. The seven-point scale used in this study differed from the scale used in the earlier study of corporate practitioners. Therefore, no specific numerical relationships are drawn.
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*Last updated March 1997..*