

BOOK REVIEW

Public Relations: Competencies and Practice

Reviewed by
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Routledge 2019
ISBN-13 978-1138552340

Number of pages: 338

As noted by scholar and editor Carolyn Kim, these are challenging times for society and those who work in public relations. Trust in organizations and the media has eroded. Exceptional and authentic leadership are increasingly needed to foster trusting and mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their stakeholders. *Public Relations: Competencies and Practice* is designed to help aspiring practitioners and emerging leaders better understand these skill sets and how they should be applied. The reader is invited to explore what it means to truly succeed in public relations today – and across a spectrum of specialized practice areas.

Content and Scope

Public Relations: Competencies and Practice is really two books in one. The first half of the book explores the competencies necessary to make a real and meaningful impact in modern public relations practice. The second half of the book surveys a broad spectrum of specialization areas and industries supported by public relations practice. In other

words, *Public Relations: Competencies and Practice* details what it takes to practice public relations effectively and the industries within which a strong and ethical practitioner can make an impact.

Kim, as editor, presents a collection of 22 chapters, each written by a leading expert in the public relations field. She recruited a who's who of contemporary scholars and thought leaders for this unique book, and that factor lends exceptional credibility and substance to this anthology. It would be difficult to find another book that covers so much ground and does so with such clarity and command; that is a credit not only to Kim, but to each of the exceptional scholars who contributed chapters.

The chapters begin with clear definitions of key concepts and, as appropriate, more detailed explication. Each chapter concludes with a summary of intended learning outcomes as well as a thoughtful profile of an esteemed practitioner with specialized expertise. This easy-to-follow framework helps the reader absorb the rich substance of each chapter while conjuring parallels to real-world circumstances.

Several chapters deserve special merit: *Business Literacy* (Ch. 6, Swanson), *Content Creation* (Ch. 7, Tenderich), and *Stewardship* (Ch. 11, Pressgrove and Harrison) are aspects of public relations practice too often overlooked or minimized. Yet, understanding how organizations stay financially strong, how they tell their stories effectively across platforms, and how they foster donor relations, if applicable, are areas of increasing importance for many sectors and practitioners. Additionally, the examination of *Ethics* (Ch. 5, Neill) is exceptionally well-written for the intended audience, including the moving charge to “start at your level of influence” and think about ethics before an ethical dilemma happens. As well, the section on *Legal Considerations* (Ch. 8, Gower) provides an easily-understandable survey of key concepts and concerns without piling on detailed cases and becoming too technically cumbersome. Finally, an unexpected unit about *Work-Life Balance* (Ch. 13, Shen) provides

an honest examination of the heavy toll that working in public relations can take; impressively, this chapter provides practical and meaningful strategies for finding such balance.

Contribution to PR Education

Kim and collaborators have delivered a volume that effectively and strongly addresses the central argument of the collection: that trust is fading, relationships are paramount, and the public relations profession needs competent, authentic leaders who can step up and take charge. This book provides important insights and actionable ideas for the individual practitioner. Certainly, other books touch on many of these ideas, but this collection stands alone in both breadth and depth.

Notably, *Public Relations: Competencies and Practices* is a true anthology. The diverse voices and perspectives of the chapter authors reflect well on the complexity of the profession. Rather than a single-note examination of such a dynamic industry, this book effectively employs multiple authors using a consistent framework to deliver a rich, thought-provoking and ultimately digestible survey of contemporary practice. It is easy to imagine undergraduate students and emerging professionals diving into the various sections of this book for insights and ideas. Instructors will certainly appreciate that this book includes examples of a syllabus, midterm and final project, as well as discussion questions.

Weaknesses and Omissions

It is difficult to criticize such a comprehensive and commendable book. However, a few gaps should be noted. The chapter on International Communication (Ch. 4, Bardhan), while strong on its own merits, feels insufficient for these times. An accompanying chapter or chapters diving more deeply into global versus national considerations, as well as the many cultural factors and concerns transcending geographic boundaries, would have been helpful. The book also combines political communications and government communications into one chapter, and

agency and corporate perspectives into another; in both instances, the double-up topics comprising the chapter could have been sub-divided to provide more in-depth examination.

Notably, *Public Relations: Competencies and Practice* includes a chapter on measurement and evaluation, yet not one on research and planning. Likewise, there is not a standalone chapter on the integral discipline of issues management; a chapter on crisis communications makes several nods to the importance of risk evaluation yet the content is heavily balanced toward reactive response rather than proactive measures.

One of the most glaring oversights is military communications; this field of specialization is growing and becoming ever more sophisticated, and one that contributes greatly to national security. In fact, the Department of Defense collaborated with Public Relations Society of America and the University Accreditation Board to create a tailored credential for military communicators, the APR+M designation.

Level of Reader Expertise / Knowledge

Public Relations: Competencies and Practice seems thoughtfully written with the student and new professional in mind. As such, the book surveys a considerable number of key concepts and does so in a digestible tone and with relatable examples. At times, the book even feels conversational; imagine an engaging guest lecture or a meaningful one-on-one mentoring session. That is the spirit this book conveys, making this collection appealing to students and effective for instructors.

Conclusion

There is likely not a single book that can explain the public relations profession in its entirety and complexity, and particularly so from the vantage point of a practitioner and the skills and qualities one needs to thrive in today's challenging circumstances. Yet, *Public Relations: Competencies and Practices* comes close. The editor and authors are to be commended for covering so much vital ground and addressing so many

important concerns, and also helping convey what all of that knowledge means to the varied sectors of public relations practice. This book is a substantive and moving examination of the profession at a particularly important crossroads.