

THE CHANGING IDENTITY OF PR IN THE MODERN MEDIA MIX

HOW MULTICHANNEL MARKETING
HAS CHANGED THE SCOPE OF PR



Summary

As digital communication becomes the norm, there is an acknowledgment that 'traditional' PR has changed and it is continuing to change its identity and the perception of what it can do for brands and businesses. With this, different parts of the marketing industry often have various ways in which they view PR and its remit.

Increasingly, public relations involves initiatives and activity on, and in, social media, online content and SEO which has led many agencies to expand and market their offering in different ways and, in some cases, rebrand entirely. As digital blurs the lines across marketing disciplines, it has both created more opportunity for work across departments and created a crowded and competitive market.

This White Paper explores what multichannel marketing means in practice, what it means for PR's position in the marketing mix and how it has impacted the way PR agencies and members of the PR industry see and identify themselves.

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Introduction

Like many industries, PR has been impacted, if not challenged and transformed, by the proliferation and fragmentation of new media channels. There are now few in the industry who do not participate in social media activity regularly as part of their campaign and on-going work.

On a practical level, this means that PRs are increasingly specialising in services outside 'traditional' public relations such as SEO, online content and multiple social platforms. On top of that, there is the integration challenge as, often, there's a need to integrate these activities and services, too.

Increasingly, this has blurred the boundaries between PR and marketing, particularly as agencies try to differentiate themselves. Even the ownership of channels can be unclear to brands and in-house communicators. For example, the question of which department should run social media activity is often up for debate.

Naturally, there are agencies prepared to take on roles from all sides of the spectrum. It is why many agencies have chosen to reposition their branding to now accommodate a broader market place and incorporate a wider range of services.

While earned media, and PR, in particular, is essential to a successful marketing and communications strategy and individual campaigns, how it fits in – and is handled and measured – is up for debate. How do PR agencies define themselves and what influences this decision? And how does PR – as a sector and a discipline – and the people working in it see its place and identity in 2016?

In this White Paper, we show a range of responses to the challenge and ask what PR in a multichannel marketing environment really means.

What is multichannel marketing and communications?

Once the marketing world was relatively simple. PR and press relations aside, marketing was either above-the-line or below-the-line. Now, there are many terms for describing the complexity of the modern-day marketing mix.

Integrated. Omnichannel. Multichannel. As the number of marketing channels and media have increased in recent years – as digital platforms have grown in influence and proliferated – the ways of describing marketing have become many and complex. We asked for The Chartered Institute of Marketing to define multichannel marketing:



Sammy Todd • marketing manager

Chartered Institute of Marketing

“Multichannel marketing starts with understanding your existing and potential customers; knowing where they are, what channels they choose to use and for what reason. Channels should only be used if they provide a good return on investment, and not just for the sake of using them.”

“PR has a multichannel focus in its own right. When creating a story it can be used for print news, which can be translated into feature articles, broadcasts, bite-size chunks to use on social media and content for online. PR is more than a press release and, depending on the budget, can be adapted to work across many different channels.”

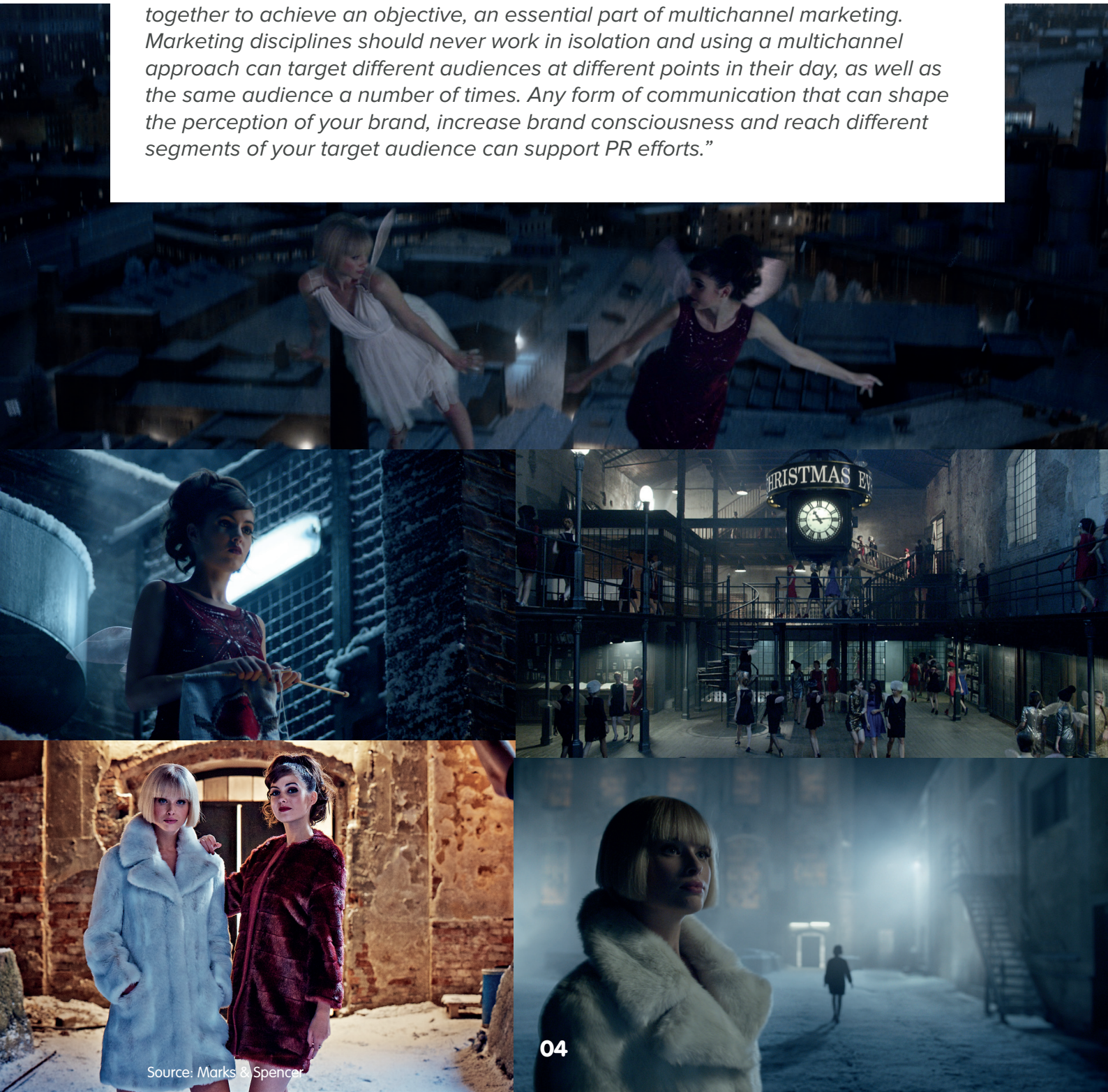
“PR is also a significant channel on its own, if the content is right and the audience engage with particular media. It can deliver complex messaging that other channels sometimes don’t have the flexibility to deliver because of space and budget. However, PR must tell a strong story or else it won’t deliver coverage and action.”



“The award winning Marks & Spencer ‘Follow the Fairies’ campaign was a successful example of a multichannel campaign. The M&S brand was initially removed from the campaign and PR led the message through social media by spreading good deeds and reporting those deeds through the #FollowTheFairies hashtag. This not only created a buzz around the hashtag but also led consumers to question who was behind the initiative.”

“Gifts from the ‘fairies’ were then sent to the general public and the media, revealing who was behind the campaign. Once the truth was out the momentum continued and the campaign grew bigger as the public got on board.”

“The ‘Follow the Fairies’ campaign was an example of marketing teams working together to achieve an objective, an essential part of multichannel marketing. Marketing disciplines should never work in isolation and using a multichannel approach can target different audiences at different points in their day, as well as the same audience a number of times. Any form of communication that can shape the perception of your brand, increase brand consciousness and reach different segments of your target audience can support PR efforts.”



How PR agencies fit in the multichannel spectrum

While it's no secret that PR today commonly has a digital element, particularly, in the form of social, there is some difference between agencies that provide a suite of integrated digital services and those that purely use social media as an extension of their PR work.

Some agencies now see their work defined as digital marketing and others as PR with digital capability. This is often reflected in the way that agencies are branded. Some have opted to drop the 'PR' brand and refer to PR only as one service among others in their marketing. PR focused agencies refer to a range of services all relating back to public relations.

We asked agencies to explain how they define their work and where they fit in an overcrowded market. We explored the divide between what agencies with a focus on PR say and what those with a multichannel focus have to say:

Digital services should complement PR

Fourth Day PR is watching this area with interest, according to manager Xanthe Vaughan Williams.



Xanthe Vaughan Williams • manager
Fourth Day PR



"The majority of good PR agencies offer not only 'traditional' media relations but also content, inbound marketing, SEO consulting and social media as a matter of course. On the other hand, 'digital' and, indeed, 'integrated' agencies very rarely offer really good media relations."

"The media – and the voice of third parties, whether those are independent bloggers, journalists or analysts - are still hugely powerful in terms of influence and reputation management. Companies concerned about brand reputation are still looking for the knowledge and experience of PR rather than the digital skills alone."

"Cultivating and managing direct, human, relationships with the media and other influencers is extremely valuable - and not at all easy - which is why we frequently find ourselves working in partnership with digital agencies. Still more so because PR now plays such a key role in SEO."

Mark Houlding, CEO at Rostrum, says that agencies may have a wide remit of services but all roads lead back to PR.



Mark Houlding • CEO
Rostrum



“The main services we offer alongside PR are content marketing, market research and thought leadership development and social media support. All of which tie into and complement PR, of course. Most clients choose Rostrum for these services because we really ‘get’ their business through our PR work with them.”

PR focused agencies’ media relations services still draw the majority of clients despite changes. Steve McComish, marketing director at London PR, said:



Steve McComish • marketing director
London PR



“PR is the biggest income stream but it is much more focused online now than in the past. PR has always been a broad church and can incorporate social media and digital strategies. There’s room for everyone.”

Additional services call for a PR reposition

Threepipe merged with digital agency Blowfish Digital in 2013. Jim Hawker, co-founder at Threepipe, said:



Jim Hawker • co-founder
Threepipe



“It’s ridiculous that people think that because a PR agency offers social and PR that it means they are an integrated agency. Most PR agencies are running influencer relations or community management via social but this is a small piece of the social media work that can be done.”

“Social commerce is booming and the social channels offer wonderful targeting tools which most PR agencies do not have the ability or the budgets to capitalise upon. We describe ourselves as both a PR and digital marketing agency because of the clients we have and the clients we expect in the future.”

“Proving value of PR has always been the challenge but we have the ability to much better prove the value of our work than we did previously. I have always stated that the biggest barrier holding modern PR back is the perceived association with media relations and corporate reputation – it pigeon holes the industry and siloes PR agencies from accessing wider budgets.”

Kevin Craig, managing director at PLMR – an agency that has a media relations offering as well as digital PR, website and SEO services and video services, said:



Kevin Craig • managing director
PLMR



“There isn’t anything that you could call traditional PR anymore because the channels we use in this industry are always evolving.”

He elaborated: “Nothing stays the same, we live in a world where Friends Reunited is closing down and MySpace is nowhere to be seen. We don’t worry about ‘traditional’ PR because we don’t think this exists anymore.”

Dominic Shales, managing director at Lexis, explained that as agencies face more pressure to offer varied services the competition has also changed:



Dominic Shales • managing director
Lexis



“It’s very common for marketing briefs to face competition by agencies that would have been seen as different areas previously. There is now a mix of businesses involved in pitching and all of them are trying to position themselves as strategic leads.”

The Gorkana Media Database guide

Helping you start the right conversations

- Each journalist profile has an integrated Twitter feed so that you can always see exactly what they are talking, and writing, about. You can even add your own handle to your account so you can communicate in-situ.
- We list all areas of expertise and topics a journalist writes about so you can guarantee that you are always pitching the appropriate message.
- You can download a media briefing pack directly from each journalist profile, which lists everything you need to know. Their career history, the last article they've written, where they like to have coffee, and their last ten Tweets...
- And, we're always innovating. The new social media topic search function provides real-time insight into what key influencers from the database are talking about. Use the tool to search for any keyword, phrase, hashtag and @ mention and you'll be presented with a contact list of the journalists who have mentioned that subject within the last 90 days.
- If you'd like more information contact your account manager, or email us at sales@gorkana.com.



How agencies change their identity and what this means for campaign success

To get a picture of where the industry stands, we have also looked at five in depth case studies highlighting the different areas of the industry that have been effected by increasing digital channels. We look at LEWIS, an agency that has dropped its PR branding and Capella, an agency going through the process of doing so. And we've focused on additional research which shows that this has become a general trend for the PR industry.

Also, we looked an example of a successful multichannel campaign by investigating how the 'This Girl Can' campaign worked to get its message across. Lastly, we gained insight from industry expert and editor-in-chief at Holmes Report, Arun Sudhaman, on how he thinks the growth in multichannel thinking has impacted the industry.

LEWIS reflects the 'journey' its clients are taking



LEWIS is one of the agencies that recently dropped its 'PR' brand. In December 2015, following a range of acquisitions, it announced a new brand identity to reflect its wider offering. It has gone through some transformation since it was founded in '95 as a PR group. Over the past 20 years it has grown to include services spanning digital, marketing, research and advertising and acquired businesses including the UK-based digital marketing agency, Purestone, in 2014 and the San Diego-based digital agency Piston in 2015 to support its vision and help deliver some of these capabilities.



Giles Peddy • group managing director
LEWIS



“Our heritage was PR, content and storytelling but, over the years, we added digital programmes and other services. It went from social media, to then looking at paid-for programmes, SEO, and web design and build. Now we also include marketing services for demand generation and lead nurturing.”

“Our re-brand was to support that broader capability we now offer to clients. We have a growing number of clients using many of our services for content development, and media relations as well as organic and paid community management and marketing. So we’re doing all of those things as part of helping them with brand awareness, demand generation and customer advocacy.”

According to Peddy, LEWIS has grown by responding to its clients’ “journey”. Brands and businesses are more integrated and, in turn, PR is part of a bigger picture. He said:

“Clients no longer want to see silos, they want to see you have an appreciation of the wider multichannel opportunities.”

The journey to an integrated offer, and, therefore, a brand is one that many PR agencies are taking at the moment. When asked if all PR agencies are set to change, Peddy says: *“There’s no point trying to battle against the wind.”*

He elaborates: *“I think many will, many have already. We’re not the first or the last, especially when it comes to bigger agencies. Some will remain focused on sectors such as tech or healthcare. Some agencies won’t have the resources to do it all themselves and work with other agencies for support. So collaborations and acquisitions will continue to happen.”*

While Peddy is a strong proponent of change, he still believes that traditional PR has a place. He said:

“I think PR will survive and has merit but it’s just one element that agencies need to offer. The ways that we engage the public has broadened and now we use different techniques and different channels, it’s just evolved and now we’re much broader. I think the opportunity is that PR works more closely with other departments. It’s also a threat because other marketing sectors are going to try and get in there as well.”

Capella on its rebrand from Capella PR



Capella is a London-based PR and digital consultancy that was founded in 2012 by Gareth Thomas. While it's already commonly referred to as 'Capella' without the PR, in February 2016 it is set to drop the PR from the tagline of its logo and tone down the public relations focus across its marketing materials, according to Thomas.



Gareth Thomas • founder
Capella



"It seemed a natural evolution – we're well known enough now that we don't need a literal descriptor in our logo. We also think it stops us being pigeon-holed by potential clients: for some, PR has very narrow connotations," said Thomas.

Capella's changes will not be limited to a change in its PR branding but also its 'digital' branding, according to Thomas. He adds that the agency has been heavily influenced by the branding expert and marketing professor at Melbourne Business School, Mark Ritson, who has urged agencies to stop thinking of digital as a separate entity but a process in which many services fit.

Thomas elaborates: *"Dropping the 'digital' bit was just as important as we think it's taken for granted now that digital is part of what we do and integrated into everything. Instead we're focusing on the concept of 'earning attention' – which has less baggage – and we're putting examples of our work front and centre on our website to let that do the talking."*

With less emphasis on the agency's PR efforts, Thomas goes on to explain how he plans to make the agency stand-out in a marketplace that is not only overcrowded but also increasingly all-encompassing in the services that they offer.

“We work in an integrated way for most clients – planning campaigns in tandem with their media planners, ad creatives, direct marketers and even events specialists. What we see more often now is that the central campaign idea is up for grabs. There’s certainly more overlap between different disciplines than there used to be, but we know our strength – it’s earned media.”

“When we launch campaigns, we’re always thinking: what assets can we create to make the story stronger? That might be an interactive map for ClearScore that showed the UK’s best money managers or a film showing people what a world without advertising would look like for Teads.”

“That’s a far cry from the days when it was all about writing press releases for tomorrow’s papers. But that said, our core differentiator versus other disciplines is our focus on earned media. We specialise in crafting the message and story that will get picked up and delivered by third parties - whether that’s journalists or other influencers. Getting credible media interested enough to carry our stories will always be our main focus.”

How PR do the UK’s top 150 agencies think they are?

Capella analysed all the websites of the agencies featured in PR Week’s 2015 UK Top 150 Agencies, which included Edelman, Weber Shandwick, Ketchum and Portland to find out how many of them still strongly identify with PR in their online branding. Here is what they found:



Gareth Thomas • founder
Capella

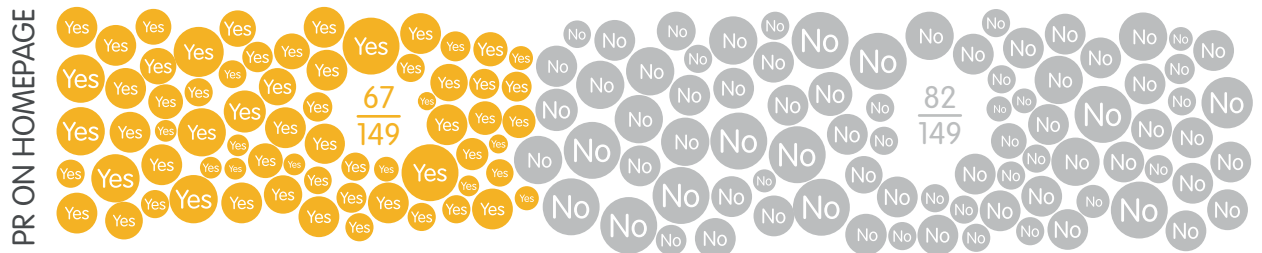


“In short, you can see that across the Top 150, it’s actually very uncommon to mention PR in your name and uncommon to mention PR on your homepage. Forty-one per cent of agencies don’t even mention PR or public relations in their ‘about us’ page.

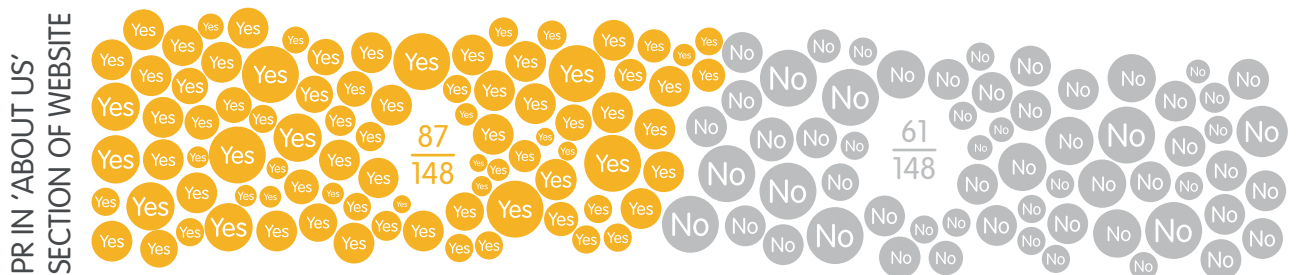
“This trend of downplaying PR is even more pronounced in the top 50 companies. Of course, we don’t have comparative data for 5, 10 or 15 years ago, but instinctively I think this shows that PR as a term is tending to get underplayed a lot more than it was.”

How PR do the UK's Top 150 agencies think they are?

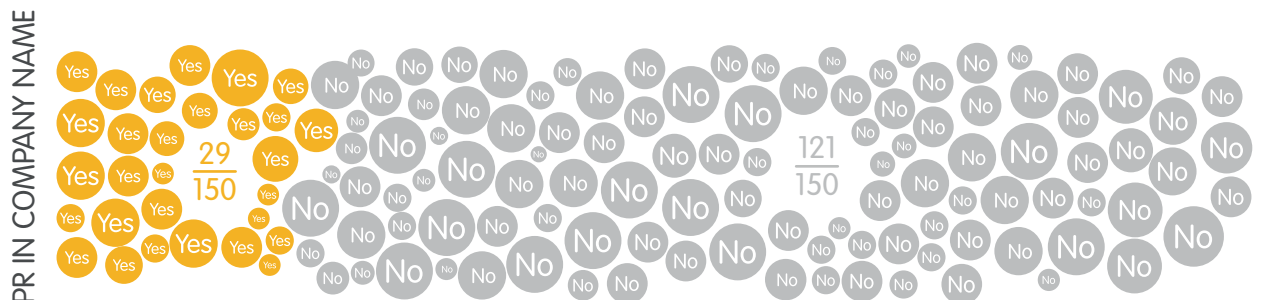
An analysis of the Top 150 UK PR agencies (as per PR Week)



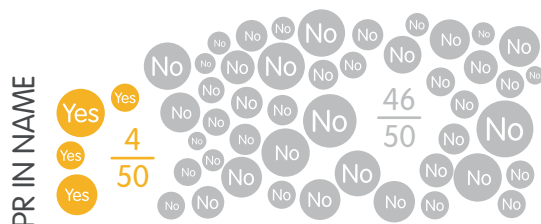
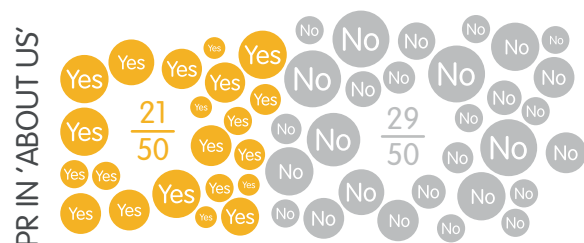
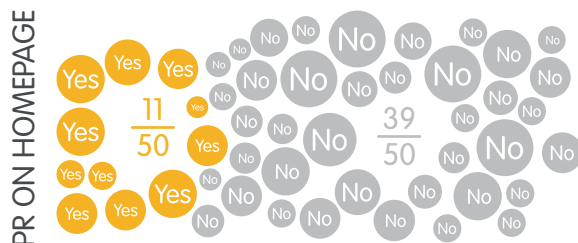
(This ignores a company that has merged so out of 149)



(This ignores a merging company and another that has a holding page but no live site, so out of 148)



Is there a difference for just Top 50 largest agencies?



The Holmes Report: a view of a changing world



Arun Sudhaman, president and editor-in-chief at The Holmes Report, discusses the changes he has seen within the PR community, why the definition of 'PR' has changed and how PR is leading brand messages in the marketing mix.

Sudhaman is an editor at a publication that aims to provide insight, knowledge and recognition for public relations professionals, and he has spent years covering the media industry in Hong Kong, Singapore and London.



Arun Sudhaman • president and editor-in-chief
The Holmes Report



"PR has an opportunity to play a more central brand-building role because of the way that digital has redrawn the engagement map. In a converged media environment that no longer relies on paid advertising messages, PR people can and should be coming up with the ideas that drive brand awareness, advocacy, sales and loyalty."

"PR professionals 'should' have the best understanding of a brand's reputation and the expectations that surround it. In today's world – that kind of insight is critical to developing effective marketing."

Despite this, Sudhaman believes many agencies are moving away from the 'PR' brand because the term has become removed from its meaning. He said:

"The original definition of public relations essentially frames it as a process which manages relationships with all stakeholders to bring mutual benefit to everyone involved."

“That kind of thinking has never been more critical, but calls for an understanding of all brand strategy and all communications channels. Unfortunately, many PR firms focus on just one – media relations – above all else.”

“PR has become a pejorative term and really it’s become synonymous with media relations and used as a collective noun. That’s why people are dropping it and they are saying ‘strategic comms’ is a better way to describe their work.”

When asked if he thinks there is still space for traditional PR, Sudhaman says:

“I’m wary of describing it as traditional PR, because I think PR is a lot broader. But, if you’re talking about traditional PR in media relations, the ability to bring scale to media relations is more challenging. It definitely has a place, the media is a powerful voice, but I think the influence has been diluted by fragmentation.”

“PR in media relations, the ability to bring scale to media relations is more challenging. It definitely has a place, the media is a powerful voice, but I think the influence has been diluted by fragmentation.”

This Girl Can: a multichannelled campaign success story



Andrew St Leger, head of media at Sport England, discusses how the 'This Girl Can' campaign has been delivered through multichannel and how print and broadcast media played an important part in its success.

Sport England's ongoing 'This Girl Can' campaign has not only broken barriers thematically – by using women with varied shapes and sizes to promote exercise, but it also has an enormous reach which is delivered through a range of channels. 'This Girl Can' videos have been viewed 37 million times on the campaign's YouTube and Facebook channels alone and 540,000 women and girls have joined the 'This Girl Can' social media community.



Andrew St Leger • head of media
Sport England



St Leger explains that one of the key principles in Sport England's PR activity is 'going where women are' to share messages and content. He says:

"Of course we've got a great website where anyone can find out more about the campaign. But, we've focused a lot of energy on our social media channels and engaged media that our audience likes and trusts. That's how we've built up an active social media community of over 540,000 women and girls."

"Print and broadcast media are also important in building this community – we target programmes and publications that our target audience watch which are different to the media Sport England traditionally talks to. It isn't good enough to get on the back pages, we need to be in the lifestyle sections," he added.

St Leger says that a key focus of the campaign was to create conversation around it, to do this Sport England linked to the #ThisGirlCan hashtag rather than the website throughout its ads.

“Key to a multichannel approach is consistency. That doesn’t mean saying exactly the same thing across a range of platforms. That’s just lazy. It means whatever the specific message or content, our audience gets the same tone, feel, attitude and inspiration whenever they see or hear about This Girl Can. The way it’s presented, however, is adapted to meet each platform’s audience expectations and behaviours.”

Working closely with a range of departments was an essential part of the campaign’s success according to St Leger and because of this the campaign has been discussed every day since it was launched in January 2015 and amassed 660,000 tweets using #ThisGirlCan.

“One of our closest working relationships is with our insight team. They’ve commissioned and compiled an enormous amount of research into the barriers that stop people from exercising. This Girl Can was born out of that insight and continues to evolve using new insight,” he said.

The essentials for PR agency success

We asked industry leaders what an agency needs to be successful today:

'A clear point of difference and clear focus is absolutely essential. It's going to be down to the quality of the agency and the people. No one size fits all.'

Dominic Shales
Managing Director
Lexis



'They would need to have data and analytics at their heart of their business if they are to be taken seriously.'

Jim Hawker
Co-founder
Threepipe



'They need to weave digital into their thinking, not treat it as an afterthought. And, whilst earned is hugely important, they need to think about how they blend in elements of paid-for media. We are increasingly developing paid-for media partnerships, native content, and advertorials as part of our campaigns.'

Gareth Thomas
Founder
Capella



'An agency today needs to understand all [digital] disciplines and to decide which ones it will specialise in. If you're keeping PR in your name, however, you had better make sure that your team has mastered the art of being able to communicate clearly – not just in writing but also in person and, yes, on the phone!'

Xanthe Vaughan Williams
Manager
Fourth Day PR London



'It was easier to start an agency 20 years ago; you now have to have a wider set of services to offer from day one. You also have to have genuine meaningful distinct features in a crowded market place.'

Kevin Craig
Managing Director
PLMR



'The one thing you need to start a PR agency has never changed – a client (or clients) who believe in you.'

Mark Houlding
CEO
Rostrum



Conclusion

Earned media and the storytelling element of PR is more important than ever before in a complex and fragmented media landscape. This paper has shown that whether PR agencies have dropped the 'PR' brand or not, the core skills of 'good' PR are necessary and set to last in the marketing mix.

However, many feel identifying their work as PR "pigeon holes" their offering and suggests they can solely provide media relations for clients rather than a service that manages relationships for stakeholders across the mix, as stated by many of the agency directors and managers we have spoken to. This, according to public relations expert Arun Sudhaman, is partly due to the fact that the definition of 'PR' has been removed from its original meaning which was previously more all-encompassing and has been reduced to more commonly refer to media relations.

In addition, new digital offerings mean that there is now a new list of criteria to ensure effective PR, such as weaving digital into earned media and implementing paid-for media partnerships and analytics. This list is combined with traditional objectives such as creating a point of difference between your content and others' and building long lasting client relationships.

