

# Career Opportunities in Public Relations

(from *UT Communication Career Services*)



## Career Services

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## What Public Relations Is

Public Relations is all about relating (or communicating) to the public—a relationship generally mediated by the press. Unlike an advertising agency, a PR agency communicates a company's message to the press, rather than directly to the client's target market. The objective in PR is to use the press to reach the target market because, when mediated by a supposedly objective third party, the message will become more powerful.

Because of their role in generating media coverage, PR professionals are sometimes thought of as disingenuous, deceitful, hucksterish flacks trying simultaneously to pull the wool over the eyes of their clients and the public at large. The fact is, in today's business world, every company, CEO, celebrity, and association wants to show the best face possible to the public, and all of them are using public relations to do so.

Public Relations serves corporations, state agencies, entertainers, and any other organizations with messages to communicate. Michael Jordan consults with PR pros to figure out how he can best maintain his image; so does Intel, seeking to maintain its image. When you read something in the newspaper about the phone company, it's likely that a PR pro was behind the scenes, either pitching the story or furnishing the reporter with statistics to write it.

## What You'll Do

Day to day, PR pros "pitch" story ideas to reporters, trying to elicit coverage of subjects important to their clients. They also serve as company spokespeople, plan and hold events intended to generate publicity, and develop strategies that will spark media interest. An actress appearing at an awards ceremony wearing nothing but a potholder, for instance, could be a PR ploy to get her in the papers—a well considered one, perhaps, if the woman happens to be Madonna, but less effective and damaging if the woman is Nancy Reagan.

Usually, you'll spend much of your day working with the media. You'll make phone calls, issue press releases, and plan events. Reporters will complain, perhaps, but in a world glutted with information, they rely on public-relations practitioners for information they don't have the time or budget to gather themselves. Those with more experience in PR will write speeches, strategize the best time to announce a new product, work alongside an advertising agency to position products in the mind of the public, develop and publish newsletters, and manage crises, endeavoring to put a positive spin on events for a client organization. And alongside representing the client to the public, PR practitioners will represent the public to the client, helping the client understand what the public wants, needs, and is concerned about.

## Who Succeeds in Public Relations

Those who succeed in PR have strong communication skills, are articulate with both the written and spoken word, are able to understand a variety of people, are confident, and quick studies—you'll need to learn quickly what your clients do in order to communicate their messages effectively. PR professionals should also be quick thinkers and persuasive.

While there are some behind-the-scenes opportunities such as research that could accommodate introverted types, most jobs in the PR field require assertiveness and an outgoing personality. One insider says that if you know you're shy, PR isn't the best career choice for you. A public-relations professional who is afraid of the public won't be able to represent his or her clients authoritatively.

## Major Employers in the Public Relations Industry

Public Relations professionals provide a variety of services for their clients, from writing press releases to planning special publicity events to monitoring how a company is covered in the media. PR work varies greatly depending on the target audience. PR includes "corporate relations", which conveys business issues, such as a change in company policy, to employees, stock-holders and investors; "community relations", which covers company interaction with the local, national and international populations; and "marketing communication", which ensures that the company and its products receive media coverage.

In the field of public relations, there are four major types of employers:

### *"In-House" Public Relations Departments*

An "in-house" public relations department is concerned for the corporate image and identity of its parent company and the presentation of that company's products to the media. Internal public relations departments do a bit of everything: they produce company newsletters and employee memos; arrange and coordinate meetings between employees; management and stock-holders; and draft documents such as the corporation's annual reports. They also provide educational materials to schools and sponsor events to keep the company in touch with the local community. "In-house" public relations departments may also be responsible for product marketing communication, sending out press releases to the media, and cultivating congenial relationships with editors and reporters.

### *Non-Profit Public Relations*

Organizations such as hospitals, churches, community service centers, universities, trade associations and charities rely heavily upon PR personnel to generate publicity. PR professionals who work for non-profits are responsible for information dissemination, lobbying for government legislation, distributing newsletters and mailings and fundraising. Maintaining good community relations by sponsoring local events and providing educational programs to schools is another essential part of non-profit public relations.

### *Public Relations Firms*

Public relations firms are independent agencies that work with a number of clients. They are hired for tasks like garnering good press, monitoring media reaction, handling government relations or addressing specific internal communication problems within a company. PR firms have well-structured hierarchies and a definite track for career advancement. Firms vary in size, from small boutiques with only two employees to giant conglomerates. Many firms have offices in all the U.S. media hot-spots like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Washington, D.C., as well as in international cities like London and Milan.

### **The U.S. Government**

The U.S. government provides a variety of opportunities for public relations practitioners. The press officers and press secretaries that work with representatives and senators as well as the public information officers that keep people informed of emergency procedures during natural disasters are all employees of the U.S. national, state or local governments. Job descriptions vary greatly as responsibilities can range from interacting with constituents on behalf of a congressman to educating school children on what to do in case of a tornado.

### **Career Tracks**

If you go into PR, you'll either work at an agency or within a larger company's communications department. At an agency, you'll serve multiple clients; at a large company, you'll serve that company—or more likely, a division or area within it. Jobs are ever-changing—every client is different. Much of the role involves account managing, though you'll be responsible for creating and executing any communication plans.

PR pros typically specialize in one area of PR. You'll hear about departments such as investor relations, public affairs, labor relations, crisis management, and so forth. The work in these departments can be very similar, but the focus is on reaching a particular target—relating to investors, the public labor, and so on.

#### **Account Coordinator or PR Coordinator**

Most people enter PR as an account coordinator or, if you go into communication at a company, the PR coordinator. Generally the account coordinator plays an administrative role, supporting an account executive. The work involves projects such as clipping newspapers, assisting in research, maintaining a list of media accounts, and coordinating mailings of press packages to the media. Generally, the account coordinator is a stepping-stone to becoming an account executive.

#### **Account Executive**

The account executive position is an account management function. The account executive works directly with the client, writing press releases, planning special events, preparing annual reports, and communicating regularly with the client. Often, the account executive tracks trends, looking for opportunities where the client might receive media coverage due to a widely covered news event, following up with media once a press release has been sent, and organizing events. Account executives are sometimes called PR Specialists in the communication department of larger organizations.

In many instances, account executives will represent a company at press conferences, write speeches, or op-ed pieces for the company's CEO, prepare the annual shareholder's report, and submit the client's products for industry awards.

A step up from the account executive is the account manager. The account manager oversees PR accounts, often managing the account executives and account coordinators. They'll often do hands-on executorial work similar to that handled by the account executive, but they'll oversee other staff members assigned to that account as well.

#### **Media Relations**

In media relations, you'll make phone calls to the press and pitch ideas for stories. Your job is to convince reporters to write about a story relating to the client. Account executives often do some media relations, but many agencies have full-time positions for people who have honed the skills required to call and pitch stories to journalists. In this role you'll need to understand what journalists are looking for and be able to quickly hook them into listening to your article ideas.

### **Director, VP**

At the director and vice president level, you'll typically manage the firm, meet with the higher-level clients, and create overall communication strategies. You'll be responsible for pitching accounts—that is, finding new clients—and making sure everything is working to the satisfaction of existing customers. You'll also want to be active in thinking up new communication services you can sell to existing clients. Within agencies, you'll be working closely with younger staff to train and mentor them along.

### **Government PR Departments**

Government agencies usually call their public relations departments "public affairs" offices. (Many private agencies offer public-affairs services as well.) In these roles, you'll translate government policy to the public, and help communicate the public's concerns back to the government. Public affairs issues include municipal elections, military recruiting, deregulation of an industry, and homelessness.

Insiders say that government PR departments tend to be bureaucratic and slow-paced. They may not offer the same opportunities for growth as the private sector, and often don't pay as well. On the upside, the work environment may not be as rigorous, and you'll have a chance to work on significant public-policy issues, meaning the work can be very fulfilling.

### **Self-Employment**

Once you have skills in the PR field, you can often find lucrative work as a consultant. Corporations often outsource the PR function, relying on outsiders to handle their needs—either an agency or a PR consultant.

*Source: Career Profile, Public Relations, www.Wetfeet.com*