

The State of the Profession: New Survey Outlines PR Challenges—and Opportunities

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By Mark Weiner, President, [Delahaye](#)

Credibility, proving value and maintaining ethical standards are the three greatest challenges in public relations, according to more than 1500 respondents to "[The State of the Profession](#)" survey sponsored by the PRSA and Bacon's Information. In my opinion, these challenges reflect very favorably for PR—if the profession is ready to ask for the opportunity. Here's a quick overview of these concerns (and their solutions):

There is concern that *the credibility of PR is at risk* within an environment where the lines between PR, advertising and journalism are growing increasingly vague. The vagaries between PR and advertising are coming as a result of the diminishing effectiveness of advertising and advertising's desire to co-opt the unique power of PR to deliver marketing messages engagingly and credibly. The bottom line is that PR offers what advertising envies—and this bodes well ... The danger, of course, is that PR becomes sublimated to advertising and our singular strength dissipates. We must continue to reinforce PR's distinct role within the marketing and communication mix to preserve our credibility.

The profession's ability to *demonstrate a clear return on investment* also continues to be a major concern. The good news is that when the returns-on-investment of PR, advertising, price promotions and other forms of marketing are compared, PR delivers the best ROI hands-down. So what are we concerned about? If you knew you could quantify a strong relative ROI, wouldn't you do it? PR's ability to deliver the best ROI across a dozen industry categories in scores of cases is such that PR's primacy is highly predictable when compared to other forms of marketing. I recently met an agency CEO who said that he'd prefer to rely on deliberately vague objectives so that no program could be termed a failure, even as he knew that he was sacrificing the ability to validate the agency's success. The question becomes one of "willingness to measure" rather than "ability to measure." And now that low-cost solutions abound, there's no reason not to measure.

The third major challenge cited in the survey is *maintaining a high ethical standard* in light of questionable business ethics. The number of criminal cases attributed to the practice of PR is extraordinarily low when compared with the legal, medical and accounting professions. It may be true that the stakes in PR are not as extreme as in the medical and legal professions—but we are fortunate to have professional standards in the PRSA Code of Ethics.

We operate in a highly ethical profession and we can be proud of our values. We must continue to seek opportunities to demonstrate the high standards of PR principals, and we must meet and exceed expectations to ensure that everyone—not just PR people—view our profession as being ethical.

Credibility, value, ethics—these are epic themes which as challenges may seem impossible to scale. But we must remember that opportunities are only realized one small step at a time. Each one of us has an opportunity each day to advance our profession by being fully awake, aware and intelligent—in sum, being true professionals.

Mark Weiner is president of Delahaye, a research-based consulting firm that provides a wide range of public relations research and evaluation services designed to create opportunities for professional communicators. He is the author of "[Unleashing the Power of PR: a Contrarian's Guide to Marketing and Communication](#)." (Jossey-Bass).