



What do journalists think of PR people?

Survey results
October 2014

The Survey

We surveyed journalists between 19 August and 12 September 2014 to find out what they really think about the ways PR people work with them.

Journalist contacts came from our FeaturesExec Media Database, which covers all media types and all sectors.

Respondents included journalists from BBC Newsnight, The Daily Express, The Scotsman, Cotswold Life, Estates Gazette, Concrete Magazine, The Lawyer, Shropshire Star, Financial Times and many others.

Over 400 journalists responded, of which 85% were staff and 15% freelance.

Below are the results with a summary of the large number of comments respondents gave for each question.

Thanks to all those who took the time to respond.

Q1 Do PR professionals understand what a journalist needs?

Do PR professionals understand what a journalist needs?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	24.0%	84
No	50.0%	172
Not Sure	26.0%	90
Comment		258
<i>answered question</i>		438
<i>skipped question</i>		3

50% answered no, 50% answered either yes or don't know.

Summary of comments:

Many comments saying “sometimes” or “some do, some don't”.

Several comments suggest former journalists have a better idea than PRs who don't have a journalism background.

Regional respondents pointed to a lack of understanding of the need for a local hook in order for the story to be relevant and of interest to local media.

There is a perception that it is mostly junior PRs contacting journalists with little understanding of what the journalist needs.

The ones that do understand a journalist's needs are worth their weight in gold.

“As an editor, some PR agencies I deal with are absolutely lovely. They know exactly what my readers will be interested in. Have taken the time to understand more about the publication and how we work with our authors.” This was one of the most positive comments.

Q2 What do you want from a PR professional?

What do you want from a PR professional? (multiple answers)		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Timely and relevant information	85.2%	374
Short pitches	44.9%	197
Emails rather than cold calls unless it's an important news story	72.9%	320
No stonewalling	31.0%	136
Nothing	3.0%	13
Other (please specify)	35.1%	154
answered question		439
skipped question		2

Summary of comments:

Understanding of the media outlet and their readers and also what the specific journalist you're pitching to writes about.

The more relevant the pitch is to the journalist, the better your chances of getting your client coverage.

Good knowledge of their clients and the industry they are in.

Honesty is the best policy – if you can't do something then just say so.

Images – lots of respondents commented about needing images although whether they want lo or hi res and how to send it to them differed from person to person.

Know what makes a good news article or feature – some PR's have a very different idea to journalists.

Access to spokespeople.

Don't ring to ask if they got the press release.

“Pitch relevant news to the relevant publication. I can't believe we still get PRs calling the news desk of the Daily Star and asking for our Fine Arts editor!”

“A clear understanding that their role (to promote/look after the interests of particular clients) is different from our role if we are doing our jobs properly (to break stories of interest and relevance to our readers). Of course, the prevalence of journalists-as-badly-paid-arms-of-the-PR-industry and churnalism blurs lines badly and I fear leads to mutual disrespect/lack of professionalism on both sides.”

Regional journalists really want you to know what area the outlet covers and where on the map that is!

Q3 Do you think PR professionals are generally well informed and fully briefed about the organisations they represent?

Do you think PR professionals are generally well informed and fully briefed about the organisations they represent?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	43.9%	182
No	43.1%	179
Don't know	13.0%	54
Comment:		148
<i>answered question</i>		415
<i>skipped question</i>		26

Summary of comments:

There is an argument we should have included a ‘sometimes; option in the answer choices – 45 or so “sometimes”, “some are and some aren’t” or “mostly” comments.

Several comments saying in-house PRs are better informed than agencies, though this may refer to general industry knowledge as agency PRs often work across multiple clients and sectors.

Q4 How do you prefer to be contacted:

How do you prefer to be contacted for:			
Answer Options	Story pitches	Invitations to events	Response Count
Email	392	383	424
Twitter	21	30	40
Facebook	2	6	7
LinkedIn	8	18	21
Phone	81	66	107
SMS	5	5	10
Post	15	56	61
None of the above, I'll get my own	32	9	33
Other (please specify)			42
answered question			439
skipped question			2

Email is the overwhelming winner here.

Summary of comments:

A handful of comments to say personal invites/pitches over social media is a big no-no, others encourage it.

Email is the best way to send pitches to most of the journalists who answered our survey although some don't mind getting an exclusive over the phone as long as it's well targeted to their publication and readers.

Every journalist and outlet has different preferences depending on the importance of the story and the way they prefer to work.

Q5 What are your greatest frustrations when dealing with PR people?

What are your greatest frustrations when dealing with PR people?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Struggling to get hold of people when needed	36.8%	161
Struggling to get straight answers to straightforward questions	47.1%	206
Lack of knowledge of the company/their client	40.7%	178
Lack of clarity on when/if they'll reply	30.9%	135
Lack of understanding of your publication and subject area	79.9%	349
Over-reliance on email	8.0%	35
Unwelcome phone calls	52.6%	230
Other (please specify)	27.9%	122
answered question		437
skipped question		4

Summary of comments:

Irrelevant press releases.

Press releases missing vital information such as contact details or images.

The contact given is unavailable to answer questions.

Phoning at terrible times – for example on deadline day.

Missing deadlines – if it's a good story but the deadline is missed everyone loses out – the PR person on coverage for their client and the journalist on a good story.

Poorly written press releases and pitches.

Poorly targeted releases and pitches.

Not delivering on promised answers, copy, interviews etc leaving the journalist in the lurch with space to fill at the last minute.

Not understanding the media outlet.

Untimely responses to information requests.

Following up press releases with phone calls.

Making it difficult when a journalist actually wants to speak to your client!

Q6 What aspects of how PRs contact you could be better?

What aspects of how PRs contact you could be better?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Quality of written pitches	37.2%	160
Number and quality of calls	31.4%	135
Amount of material sent	25.8%	111
Approach to storytelling	26.7%	115
Understanding of your media outlet and report interest	79.1%	340
Understanding of what makes news	72.8%	313
Other (please specify)	18.6%	80
answered question		430
skipped question		11

Summary of comments:

There’s a pattern emerging – all they really want is for the PR to know what they cover and to make sure whatever they’re pitching is relevant and newsworthy.

Timing – too early or too late to use the story.

This one comment sums up all the others: “Fewer calls, stronger news angles, technical knowledge, less unnecessary information, forget about storylines - if it's news, it's news.”

Q7 How do you see the role of PR professionals?

How do you see the role of PR professionals?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
As a source of information that has to be placed into context by journalists	54.9%	240
As a logistics person to connect me with the real sources of news	50.1%	219
As a legitimate spokesperson for the organisation	36.4%	159
As a well informed source of good stories	20.8%	91
None of these	4.6%	20
Other (please specify)	18.5%	81
answered question		437
skipped question		4

Summary of comments:

“Someone to give me the basics of a story and then to get me the relevant items. For example, an interview with a company director, photographs and other materials to make a good story. “

“Instead they seem to be employed to (a) prevent negative stories appearing and (b) to try to sneak free adverts into my publication.”

“The best are all of these and more. (A lot to ask, I know!) Most fulfil two or three of these elements. The worst, er, don't.”

“Young people being thrown to the wolves by a bizarrely Darwinian industry”

“I see them as enablers for sourcing information and comment from companies. “

“People trying to sell good news stories about their clients.”

“What’s missing here is what PR is actually about: reputation. There are various elements to the job, but I understand that their job is ultimately to improve the reputation and exposure of their clients.”

Generally the comments talk about PRs being a barrier between journalists and the information/people they really want to speak to.

Q8 In your experience has there been an improvement in the professional quality of PR professionals in recent years?

In your experience has there been an improvement in the professional quality of PR professionals in recent years?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	14.8%	64
No	57.4%	248
Don't know	27.8%	120
Comment		104
answered question		432
skipped question		9

Summary of comments:

“Yes - because so many good ex-journalists have entered the profession.”

“More design and marketing companies are winning pitches and have no idea how public relations/journalism works.”

Some not sure but have noticed an increase in the number of PRs over the years.

“It's got harder to place PR stories, I think, so the approach seems more 'quantity not quality' - I rarely get tailored approaches from PRs that have thought about my publication and what I write about. I know that is a time issue, but it feels like there is a lot more 'desperate' flinging of press releases at anyone and everyone.”

“There are some very good PR professionals, but it looks like more and more not well trained and not well educated assistants are working in PR agencies.”

“Again, some PRs are just better at their jobs than others - just like journalists. That hasn't changed.”

“...when it comes to established, corporate PR firms. However, I have also noticed an increase in the number of one-horse DIY outfits, many of which are truly atrocious. Maybe people feel it's easy just to set up shop with an iPad from home and succeed at PR. Even I know it takes skill to be good on the Dark Side.”

Q9 If you could give one golden nugget of advice to PRs, what would it be?

There were 384 comments given in answer to this question, we've picked out the most common/useful ones here:

Think like a journalist.

Research the outlet you're targeting, know what they cover, who the readers are and specifically what the journalist you want to speak to writes about.

Don't follow up emailed press releases with a phone call to check they got it, its 2014 they got it.

Know your client and their market so you can answer questions about them.

Be honest.

Exclusives/Scoops are good but don't give them away to competitors.

Don't get frustrated when your story can't be used.

Put yourself in the shoes of the journalist – is it newsworthy? Is it going to get readers to turn the page/click on the story?

Q10 What type of media do you work for?

What type of media do you work for?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Consumer	19.9%	83
Trade/B2B	51.2%	214
National Press	17.9%	75
Regional Press	19.4%	81
TV/Radio	5.7%	24
Blog	6.0%	25
answered question		418
skipped question		23

Q11 Are you a staff or freelance journalist?

Are you a staff or freelance journalist?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Staff	84.9%	355
Freelance	15.1%	63
answered question		418
skipped question		23

About DWPub

DWPub (www.dwpub.com) helps PRs, organisations and the media connect, collaborate and tell stories more effectively every day. We provide the media and marketing community with simple, easy-to-use and highly effective online media relations information, management and networking services which together we call the DWPub Media Suite.



Up-to-date media contacts database, forward features and media management tools. FeaturesExec is essential for professional PRs as well as businesses, charities and organisations that want media coverage.



Media enquiries and coverage opportunities at your fingertips. ResponseSource provides leads from journalists for PRs, businesses, charities and other organisations that want media coverage.



Target opt-in UK and international journalists, share images, documents and video and optimise your press releases for search and social media. Create and manage your own customised newsroom to engage with journalists and other influencers.

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Comments or queries about this survey are very welcome.