

Will PR and content marketing play together nicely?

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A report by

 **CollectiveContent**



ResponseSource
Connecting the media

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Introduction

This report, based on primary research with UK public relations (PR) professionals, isn't strictly about the future of PR. But it is about how those who work in PR will tackle one important part of their future: engaging – or not engaging – with brand journalists.

'Brand journalist' is our less-than-perfect catch-all for those who write articles, shoot video and do various other types of content creation on behalf of companies or other organisations rather than the media.

This year's research will show you that PRs on the whole are more savvy about this equation than ever. However, their mix of views on the subject is broad and worth exploring.

It is hard for anyone to say to what extent the PR community will drive this new form of content and its creation – or to what extent they will be dragged into a brave new world that some don't even consider all that brave or new. But in this report we will do our best.

Sample

This was our largest survey yet. As in the previous two years this was a new sample of respondents, although there was a small amount of crossover with the research from 2015 and 2016.

In February and March 2017 we put our questions to 348 PRs, 96 of whom work in-house as opposed to at agencies. That's 28 per cent in in-house roles, up marginally from the 26 per cent in 2016. We split out some analysis to show differences between agency and in-house PR views.

Whether you work in PR, in marketing, as a content creator of some type or in any related field, we'd love the chance to continue this conversation.

We also hope you'll find the following report valuable.



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Part 1: How PRs work with brand journalists

Every year we have asked: 'Have you ever been contacted by someone creating content on behalf of a regular organisation – eg, a company or government department – rather than print/online/broadcast media?'

And we made the point in last year's report that we would expect the answer to be very close to 100 per cent. But it isn't. That's because this question's answer is a matter of perception. Many high-end brand publications – a kind of content marketing – are so well-established and so similar to traditional publishing/media that PRs don't think of them in that way.

Consider food magazines from large supermarkets, [BA's High Life](#) in-flight magazine or fashion glossy [Porter](#). All of these exist so their owners will make money in their core businesses. These kinds of ventures are very rarely standalone profit centres.

Now back to our question, this year the number answering 'Yes' was up – to 62.7 per cent against 58.1 per cent in 2016. But this is still below the two thirds who answered positively in 2015.

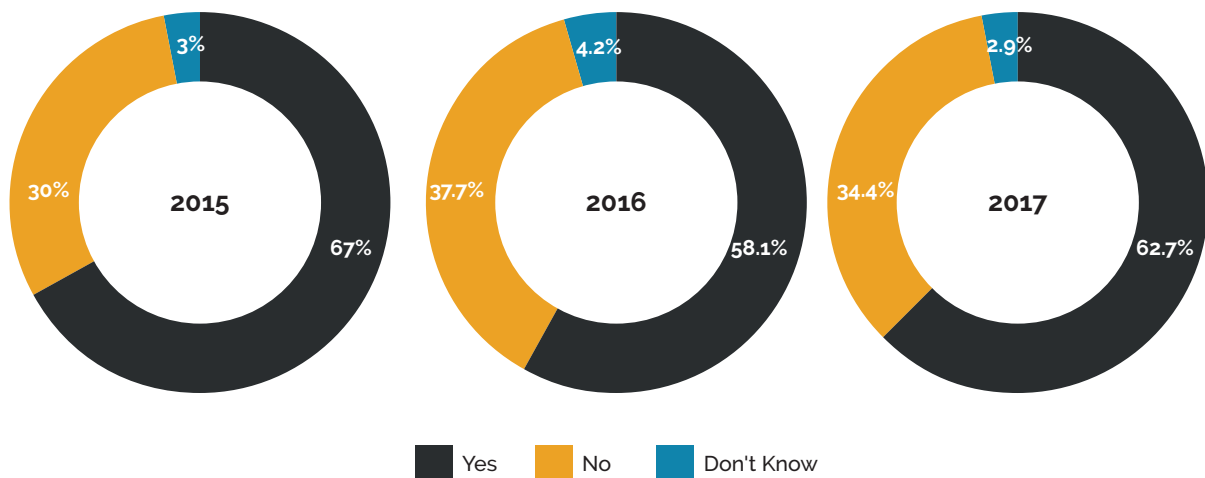
If you look at Fig (a) you will see the three years side by side. It's a mixed bag. You might pick up on 'Don't knows' dropping to their lowest level yet, showing less uncertainty.



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Fig (a) Have you ever been contacted by someone creating content on behalf of a regular organisation – eg, a company or government department – rather than print/online/broadcast media?



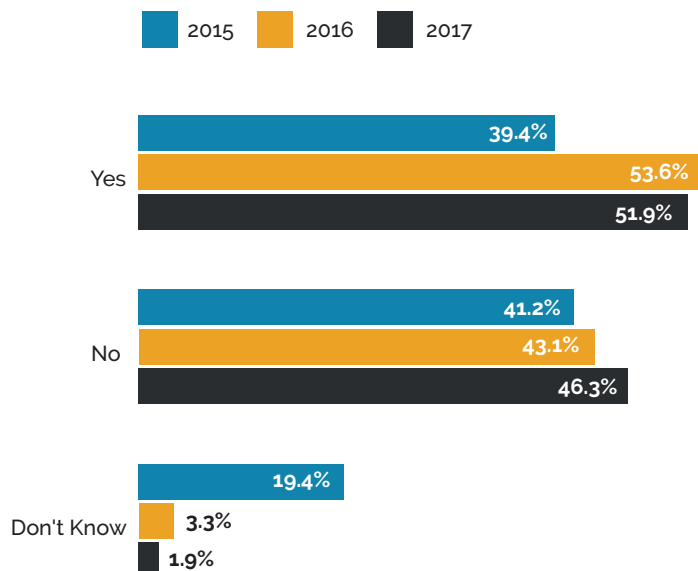
Brand journalists treated equally by PRs? Not quite, not yet

As in past years, we then followed up with only those who told us they hear from brand journalists. We want to know the different ways they treat brand journalists and traditional journalists.

Anecdotally, many of us in content marketing agencies feel we know the answer to this. Having worked as independent journalists in the past and now commercially, we experience the differences every day. But, to our knowledge, no one else researches the actual differences, in this case from the perspective of the key gatekeepers in PR.

Our numbers show that this year's sample is slightly more certain than in previous years – as with the last question, 'Don't knows' are down (1.9 per cent) – but in general a little more sceptical.

Fig (b) Do you treat these enquiries in the same way as you would when contacted by media?



“

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”

Whereas in 2016, 53.6 per cent of respondents said they treat enquiries the same way from either type of journalist, this year that had fallen slightly to 51.9 per cent. However, that is still far ahead of the 39.4 per cent saying 'Yes' in 2015, a year where almost a fifth of respondents didn't have a clear positive or negative answer to this question (19.4 per cent).

One small note of difference to last year: when we interrogated these numbers to see if, as in 2016, agency PRs are more likely to treat enquiries from each kind of journalist the same way, we found this year agency and in-house replies almost identical. Later on, we'll do some similar analysis that shows agency PRs tend to be more tuned in to industry trends.

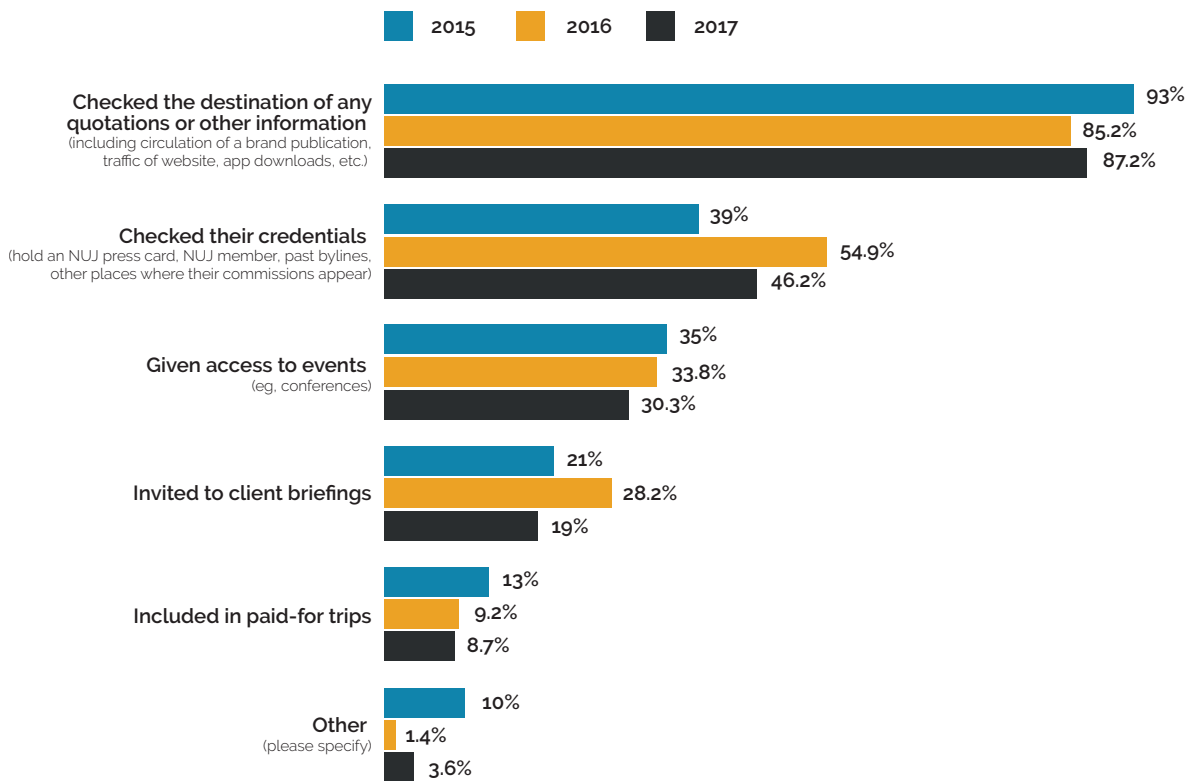
What have you done for me lately?

We then drilled down into this subject to ask about specific tactics and the future of this whole concept of brand journalism.

Perhaps worryingly for brand journalists, PRs are engaging with them in fewer ways than they are for regular journalists – or so it would seem at face value.

In Fig (c) we can see the only metric that is up on a year ago is 'Checked the destination of any quotations or other information' – 87.2 per cent this year versus 85.2 per cent in 2016 (and still down on the 93 per cent of 2015).

Fig (c) – Which of the following have you done, in relation to working with brand journalists? (choose as many answers as you like)



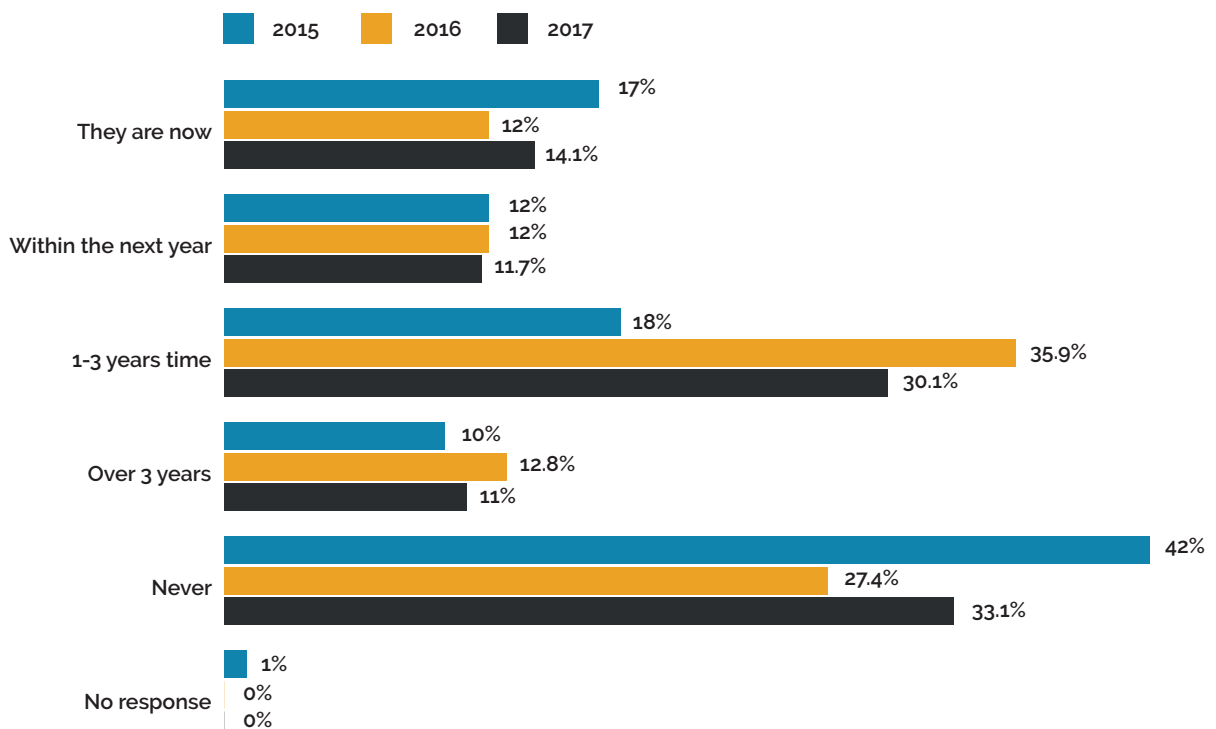
However, in defence of these near across-the-board falls, we should consider broader trends in PR. Whereas anyone in PR will always research the destination where a journalist's work will appear, arguably they are in general doing less of some of these other activities: events, client briefings and trips. If so, then the brand journalism numbers would fall even if general engagement is on a par with traditional journalists. But that's just a theory.

Near term versus long term

Next up is one of our biggest questions: 'When do you think brand journalists will be treated on a par with traditional journalists?'

This is a big one because last year we grouped the answers to take the overall temperature of how PRs see the future of brand journalism carried out for brands. This is also an area where the qualitative answers from our respondents come into their own

Fig (d) – When do you think brand journalists will be treated on a par with traditional journalists?



Some numbers above are clearly higher or lower than last time ('They are now' is up but so too is 'Never'). But when we group the first three answers and compare against the latter three – what we called progressives versus refuseniks in last year's report – we find results that are between the 50/50 split of 2015 and the 60/40 in favour of progressives in 2016. However, this year's result again errs on the side of the progressives.

Perhaps what that shows more than anything is that progress for those writing commercially is uncertain in the eyes of PRs. There are many nuances, we heard.

We heard the decision to engage on the part of a PR is based often on the destination of content: it "depends on the brand", said one. Another respondent said something similar: "It's not the journalists that are treated differently, it's the publications."

Echoing this, someone else expanded that the decision is “always subject to considering whether the opportunity is the interest of my client(s)... and worth the effort on the basis of target audience, size of audience etc”.

One respondent summed up the bad and good of working with this newer breed of content creator:

“Part of the definition of journalism is its independence. ‘Brand journalists’ can never be equivalent to that. If there’s a comparison to be made, it should be to PR and marketing professionals, who are on the same side of the fence. [But] as a PR I am constantly looking for content and stories that are engaging for my clients’ audiences — exactly what a ‘brand journalist’ does.”

“

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Part 2: Defining terms

As in past years, we start our research (even if we don't start this report) by asking all our 348 participants about some of the jargon relating to this area.

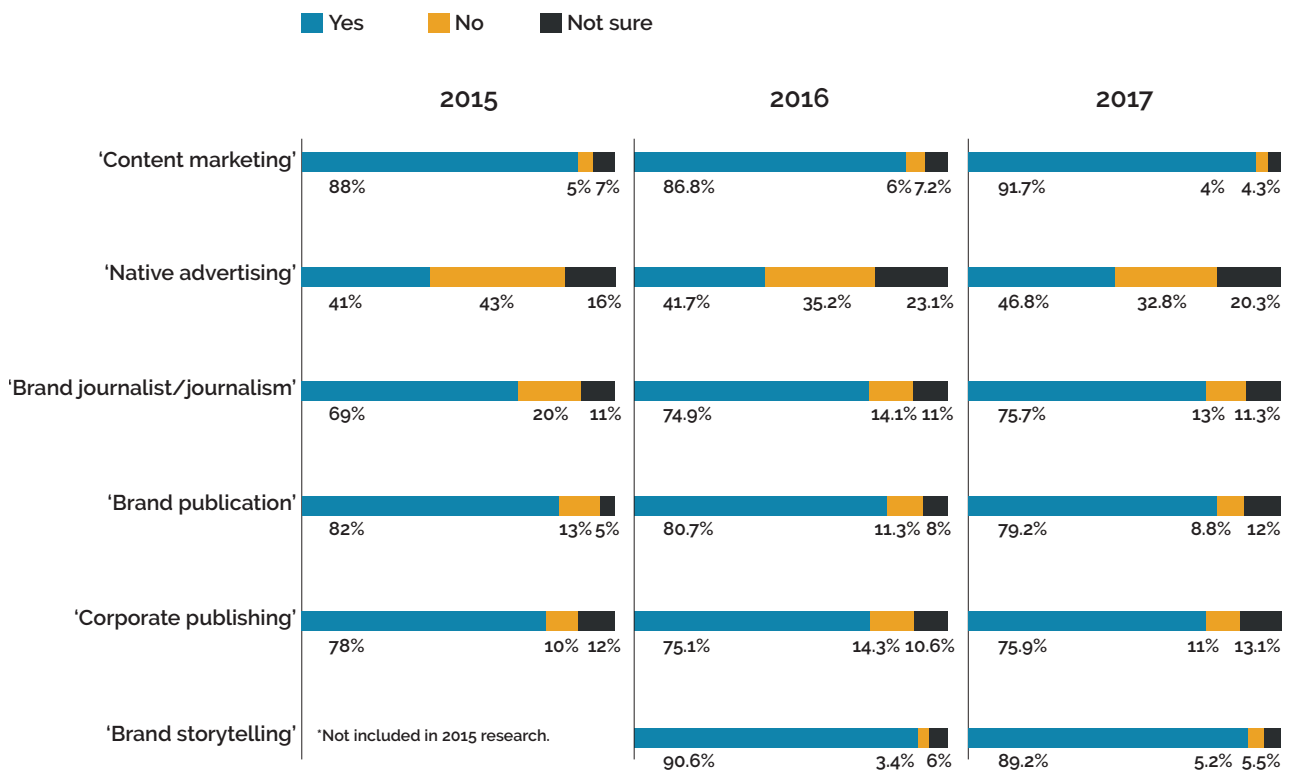
One reason this is important is because it gives a general snapshot of how savvy our sample considers itself. Our inference – which we are happy to see challenged – is that other answers in this report are more valuable if respondents are more generally aware about this evolving field.

And this year the news is good. Turning to Fig (e), we can see that comprehension of our six key terms is almost universally up.

'Brand publication' is close. For some reason 'Don't knows' have gone up nearly 50 per cent. And we only have a comparison to make for 'Brand storytelling' for last year, not for 2015 when it wasn't included.

But other answers show an increase in comprehension.

Fig (e) – Would you say you understand the following terms?)



When we sliced our results to this 'Defining terms' question so it was answered only by those in PR agencies, comprehension was marginally higher for all terms – apart from native advertising where the Yes/No ratio for agency staffers was 54.1%/29% as opposed to 46.8%/32.9% for the whole sample – so a clear gap on perceived understanding around native. Remember, agency respondents made up just under three quarters of total respondents.

Why are agency PRs more tuned in (in their view) to the main terminology around content marketing? Answers on a postcard...

A note on native

One of the notable changes has been about native advertising. Compared to some of the other terms, in all years it has registered the highest number of 'Not sures', but this year is notable because there are now more saying 'Yes' (they understand it), and fewer saying 'No' (they don't understand the term).

Native advertising usually involves brand journalists working for or at publishers, creating high-quality, ring-fenced content in the style of that publication but paid for by an advertiser – thus it's 'native'. It's been a confusing area for many.

Part 3: Why brand journalists are different

We live in a world flowing – some would say overflowing – with content. And most of that content is now produced by creators outside the media.



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That sets up a paradox for many in PR. On the one hand, this is where their interaction with writers, video-makers and others will increasingly come. On the other hand, this dynamic is slightly different to dealing with traditional journalists, as they weren't shy about telling us. (Even the term 'brand journalist' is unsatisfactory, we accept.)

But first, what was the main reason for PRs treating brand journalists differently? Of those who told us they know they interact with them, 67.8 per cent cited 'Conflict between those paying for the content and your own company/client'. This was up slightly on the 66.5 per cent who said the same in 2016. Does this show PRs are savvier now to content marketing goals? Or are these concerns about content marketing overplayed? (See box on page 13.)



The 'conflict' answer also ranked above 'Lack of details (quality, official numbers) about the place where the content will appear', cited by 60.8 per cent of respondents, and 'Lack of journalist credentials/qualifications', at 42.1 per cent.

Clash of content

The biggest concern, which came out in the qualitative answers we recorded, was from PRs who see an agenda on the part of brand journalists and/or a clash with their own clients' agendas.

One comment mentioned both these positions: "I question their impartiality and that my client is likely seen as supporting/endorsing the brand they work for."



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Others also spoke about a "bias towards [a] brand agenda" and that they "lack the neutrality/kudos of traditional unbiased journalists" –

even though many brand content creators are often the same journalists. But we take the point that final sign-off rests with the brands and not independent writers and editors.

Metrics

Measurement is important in PR. Several respondents mentioned it in relation to content from brands.

One spoke about how it can be "difficult to carry out due diligence", while another expressed the related issue of "lack of clarity around impact as measured against traditional PR".

Another simply said: "The readership of the media outlets aren't as high as mainstream national press or niche trades, or [we] can't track it as effectively."

And the tracking/metrics issue is important. While brands are getting better at determining the value of their content against their marketing and even sales goals, they pay little attention to the metrics of PRs who help them create it in the first place.

As to whether the comment about brand readerships not being as "high as mainstream" outlets refers to numbers or quality, we're not sure. Try playing the numbers game with the [Red Bulletin](#) magazine or any of the supermarkets' customer publications. Most traditional consumer publications envy that kind of reach.

And in terms of audience quality, it's quite often the same people today reading brand content alongside traditional media. For a publication such as Net-a-porter's Porter glossy, it's hard to tell the difference, sitting as it does on newsstands alongside rivals such as Vogue, Harper's Bazaar or Elle. The same goes across plenty of B2B titles.



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Feel the quality

But one respondent put it wonderfully: "FT Weekend v BuzzFeed - there is NO comparison. The FT is exquisite."

OK, so maybe that's comparing an upstart – one that isn't so much a brand publication as a publication that relies on native advertising – with a media thoroughbred. But the desire to be seen in the right places will remain strong.

Put simply: "At the moment there's also not always the same desire (yet) from many clients to be in branded publications as there is in traditional publications."

The question is: how fast will that change?

The bias of brand content?

As we asked about why brand journalists – and the publications they write for – are treated differently, one thing we heard a lot was bias.

One comment was hard to disagree with: “They are advertising copywriters, not journalists.”

But another PR added: “Often difficult to work with journalists with a fixed agenda.”

To that, we’d add several points. First of all, the broad goals of brand publications suit a wide agenda, sure, but in individual articles or videos there is often as much licence to report interesting, independent content as in traditional media. There’s also often more time and budget to do a quality job – something that has been noted in previous years’ research.

Secondly, also consider the inherent bias in much media. There is naturally a pride (some journalists would say pleasure) in creating something editorially independent that doesn’t chime with an advertiser’s message on an adjacent page, but the overall position of a publication is usually tightly controlled. The word ‘agenda’ is accurate. This happens less in some fields but many writing about politics and various social or business issues know this.

Finally, the most complete answer on this echoed many of the concerns:

A brand journalist isn’t actually a journalist, in the sense that they are providing content for a commercially interested party. I understand that this is increasingly true on consumer publications but they can never be truly objective and the goals of providing genuinely interesting content that someone would pay for will always come second to the commercial goals of their client.

If you can see the nuances here (most independent publishers are also “commercially interested parties”, to go back to the previous point), this set-up will have to be in the minds of most PRs dealing with brand journalists.

We think back to the third of respondents who say they don’t get contacted by these non-traditional content creators. How do they stand a chance of understanding these trends?

Part 4: Next?

Every year that we've conducted this unique research we've made out trends. But 'made out' implies these trends aren't always straightforward to see – and that's true.

We see a pretty clear improvement in the understanding of key terminology (our Part 2). We would hope for that as reports like this and a wealth of other content discuss this subject.

But in other areas, we see a mixture of views from PRs about working with so-called brand journalists or any kind of brand content creator (Part 1). For some, it's clearly an opportunity to be grasped. Others remain savvy but sceptical. A third group – the final third – say they don't even interact with these kinds of content creators, even though they almost certainly do.

How will that all affect the quality of content that brands can create?

Lastly, and perhaps the major takeaway from this year's report, the PRs' opinions show why their embrace of brand content creators is generally tentative.

Given the space to explain, respondents spoke about "bias" and "agendas" – which we challenge, at least on the micro, story level. But they also brought up the subject of transparency, speaking about due diligence and measurement of results. One demanded: "Brand journalists should have to adhere to the same code of conduct and ethics as traditional journalists."

To this, we would expect leading brand publications, and the content agencies that brands use, to start to build this transparency and quality threshold into what they do. But it will take time for it to become the norm, as it is in a media world that can draw on many years of experience.

Just as brands are no long newbies at creating their own media-grade content, so too they must better understand the benefits and demands of working with other companies' PR representatives.

From the perspective of PRs, scepticism is healthy. But few will deny the amount of change their profession is going through. When seen through the eyes of PR becoming many things today – part influencer relations, lobbying, social media practitioners and so on – working with brand content creators looks like one of the more straightforward evolutions.



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Collective Content is a content marketing agency. Our network of writers, designers and videographers produces media-grade content, so companies can have better conversations with their customers.



ResponseSource provides easy-to-use tools that connect PR professionals and businesses to journalists, enabling them to give stories relevant coverage – quickly and easily.