

Public Relations as a Theatre-style Media Spectacle: Results of a Polish Public Opinion Poll

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Abstract

The article analyses opinions of Poland's adult residents on the image of public relations. Reflections are based on results of two nationwide surveys conducted in 2014 and 2005. The author points out the deteriorating image of PR in the Polish society and lists the reasons why public relations are associated mostly with not very ethical promotional and advertising techniques and propaganda.

Publication History:

Received: February 08, 2017

Accepted: October 02, 2017

Published: October 04, 2017

Keywords:

Public relations, Tools of promotion, Image of public relations, Image of PR in Poland, PR as a metaphor of a theatre show, Media spinning, Media agenda-setting

We will rely on three hypotheses in this article:

1. The civilization development contributes to greater communication requirements and expectations: we want to live in a better world and know more to feel safe;
2. Treating public relations as mostly a promotion tool in marketing has led to depreciating the positive meaning of that term, and to associating it negatively with propaganda or planned theatre show, whose script and direction are the responsibility of a public relations expert;
3. The loose operating framework of public relations service on the Polish market, heterogeneity of the profession, wide range of customer's expectations and blurred responsibility for the actions taken cause a situation where, in a daily practice, PR is associated with socially unacceptable activities (e.g. smearing the competitors, buying the opinion of the media, using lies, corruption, dishonest advertising or propaganda etc.).

Let's Look for a Social Significance of Public Relations

Media discourse loses the proper sense of the term 'public relations', which, as early as in the first half of 20th century, became the inherent part of social communication. Indeed, it's about every organization communicating with its environment and stakeholders. This process of keeping others informed needs to be deliberate, planned and organized; it should prevent potential crises and overcome barriers to communication between people [1]. The fundamental principle of public relations is an open and friendly contact with people, one based on respect for another person, and, thus, acknowledging his or her arguments and points of view which are subject to social criticism and need changing. The word 'public' is of special importance here: communication should not be closed but public, unconcealed, open, with no dishonest intentions – its goal, after all, is always to win friends, sympathisers, and followers. Any unethical activities that come to light destroy all the previously achieved positive results of communication and ruin the reputation and trust acquired by the communicator [2].

Many of the world's top companies apply the above philosophy of public relations as a permanent and important part of the corporate management policy, helping the corporation garner and maintain understanding and social support necessary to accomplish its

objectives. It does so using public opinion polls to customize its tasks to the public's requirements and to run activities that enable better cooperation with society. This planned and often persuasive communication is, indeed, public – which also means that it is publicly available to everybody.

In the United States, the public relations code of conduct points out that it is the duty of PR professionals to help the pluralistic society make decisions and to contribute to mutual understanding between groups and institutions. PR is meant to help build consensus between the society and political world on all public matters. Hence, it serves all institutions: companies, trade unions, government agencies, foundations, hospitals, educational and religious institutions, social associations.

To achieve their goals, these institutions should learn the attitudes and value system of their relevant public (which term is equivalent to 'target markets' or 'target groups'), in order to build the most efficient relationships possible. It's no secret that among marketing professionals public relations are defined as persuasive communication addressing relevant public. According to those professionals, a company's communication with the public opinion is composed of 4 elements: corporate identity marks as organizational symbols, institutional advertising, customer contact programme, and publicity, or free-of-charge media information about the company, its products and services. Publicity is usually the responsibility of public relations department. Hence, authors who write about marketing take note of its close ties with PR, but they also emphasize that it is an error to equate the two domains as their tasks are different [3].

The task of marketing is to identify customers and their needs, develop products that will meet those needs and deliver them to the interested buyers. Meanwhile, it is not clear to everybody that PR

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Citation: Olędzki J (2017) Public Relations as a Theatre-style Media Spectacle: Results of a Polish Public Opinion Poll. Int J Journalism Mass Comm 4: 129 doi: <https://doi.org/10.15344/2349-2635/2017/129>

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is not only a marketing promotional tool, but also a comprehensive action for customizing a company's policy and management board's decision to public opinion's expectations and interests; if needed, it also involves forming the opinion, maintaining friendly relations with all important social groups who are interested in the goals and content of our information policy. In public relations we are dealing mostly with care for the company's reputation and with the message sender providing free of charge (unlike in advertising) information on the company to various groups within the public.

The origins of the modern public relations philosophy can be found on the American continent in late 18th century in the atmosphere of discussion around the drafts of the new country's constitution that was then being written. It's worth mentioning that this was a period of quite a popularity of the followers of the social contract theory, natural law and liberal constitutional state. Reportedly, references to the public relations idea were made by Thomas Jefferson in his pleas for civic self-governance and for the duty to build social trust and responsibility of the democratic state institutions being born. In 1832, lawyer Dorman Eaton explained public relations as establishing human contacts "for the general good". This idea was not, back then, associated with business or with using information for personal benefit or corporate profit. The world's first professional advertising agency was established over a decade later by Volney Palmer in Philadelphia in 1841¹.

Though Ivy Lee still saw communication as a one-way transmission and there is no feedback in his theory, he founded the undisputable principle of information reliability. The PR job, according to himself and to another father of PR, Edward Bernays, is a profession that requires college education. With the huge amounts of information reaching us every day, there is a natural demand for reliable and professional PR experts, who can work together with all PR communication recipients. So the first schools of professional PR start to emerge, with PR not yet seen as a marketing promotional tool but more as practicing various techniques of public propaganda.

The above facts seem to demonstrate that it is only thanks to the emergence of mass production and technologies conducive to inventions, urbanization, growth of readership (with all these factors being interdependent in 19th century and stimulating citizens' access to all media), that we can call the United States the cradle of consciously conducted public relations activities. Now, in early 21st century, we can also say that in countries with no free market economy, free and de-monopolised media (including Internet), legally guaranteed free flow of information and freedom of speech, there is no chance of developing public relations. If any of those stimulators is missing, we are dealing with a monopoly of propaganda institutions and commercial advertising.

In my opinion, these days, when we consider the development of civilization and mass media, what we should understand as public relations is: deliberate and conscious public image management in the interest of an organization or any defined human group, consisting in any communication activities aimed to achieve positive relations with the public. It involves mostly communication activity (including any, also marketing-related, tools and means to attract human attention) oriented to the art of forming an image of that group, or brand of institutions, social, professional and religious organizations (etc.), which helps build reputation and friendly relations with the public.

¹In 1849, his agency claimed to represent 1300 daily titles out of 2000 then published in the USA.

Cf: http://www.designhistory.org/Advertising_pages/FirstAd.html [2015]

This social image is a colourful idea that one or many publics have of themselves, or of other groups or institutions; it's not a real image, one that is outlined accurately and in detail, but rather a mosaic of many details captured randomly, partially, with blurred differences.

However, an organization's image itself is not the most important goal of public relations activities, as what matters more than image for each institution's efficient and long-term operation is its reputation or an organization's intangible value as a synergy of all of the organization's activities: institution's working culture, consumer appraisal of products or services offered, employee opinions and behaviours, management culture, opinions of investors, customers, media and different publics or stakeholders making statements about this organization and thus influencing its image, and, consequently, determining this institution's reputation.

More is expected from public relations experts than from promotion and image specialists: they are not only supposed to be experts in media and negotiations with stakeholders, mediate in communication between an organization and its public but also constantly monitor the society's behaviour and be able to identify relevant groups to which address their messages. Monitoring involves conducting diligent surveys of opinions, attitudes and behaviours as well as knowledge about the organization held by all groups of stakeholders - both current and potential ones. What consequently becomes the basic working method is dialogue, providing two-way communication, where symmetry is ensured not only by listening to stakeholders but, what's more novel and difficult, by tailoring the organization to the public's expectations. In 21st century we have a right to expect from organizations and companies a sense of greater accountability to the society - a certain degree of integration with expectations, behaviours and attitudes.

The Image of Public Relations in Poland

Meanwhile, as noted already back in 2006 by L. Heath and W. Timothy Coombs [5, p. 7], defining public relations as only building an organization's image oversimplifies and caricatures this term, causing PR professionals to be seen as liars who tailor even true information to image purposes, only to achieve their desired effect. As a result of a disregard for the role of reputation, the social meaning of the term 'public relations' is far from the ideals the profession was guided by in its inception. Similar conclusion can be drawn from the results of nationwide survey conducted by GfK Polonia on 6-9 march 2014, based on a representative non-anonymous sample of Poles aged 15+, randomly selected from PESEL database. Target individuals were selected based on two-stage stratified sampling scheme with a total number of interviews $N = 1020$. Interviews were conducted using CAPI face-to-face interviews at respondents' homes. Surveys were conducted with the financial support of vortal Proto.pl, which also helped us conduct similar surveys in November 2005, when we used services of GfK Polonia as well.

The set of questions was in this situation nearly identical to that of nine years earlier, which helped compare the answers and observe any changes in the opinion. As it turned out, this was a very fruitful research assumption. In the diagrams below we show results of both surveys, while placing a special emphasis, in the commentary, on any clear differences in respondents' assessments and opinions.

Hence, from the recent survey it follows that the number of people claiming to be familiar with the term 'public relations' has greatly increased in Poland (from 27% in 2005 to 39% in 2014) - Cf. figure 1.

Throughout this several-year period the group of people who associate public relations more often with business and politics has increased, while the association with propaganda and advertising has reduced; on the other hand, a new negative association has emerged - a link to corruption.

So public relations in Poland are clearly associated mostly with marketing and sales and with the activities of political circles suspected of manipulating information, which, consequently, also applies to journalists and media including advertising as the entire communication system (figure 2).

According to survey participants, the activity referred to as 'PR practicing' means mostly promoting an organization and caring about its reputation. One in three respondents also pointed to the one-sidedness of the presentation- only presenting positive features and omitting an organization's negative behaviours.

Lack of objectivity is also related to two more critical opinions according to which PR practising also involves self-advertisement and bragging that is not founded in facts. Such an understanding of public relations, as of 2014, is confirmed by the results of another question requesting to describe the term 'public relations'. According to the

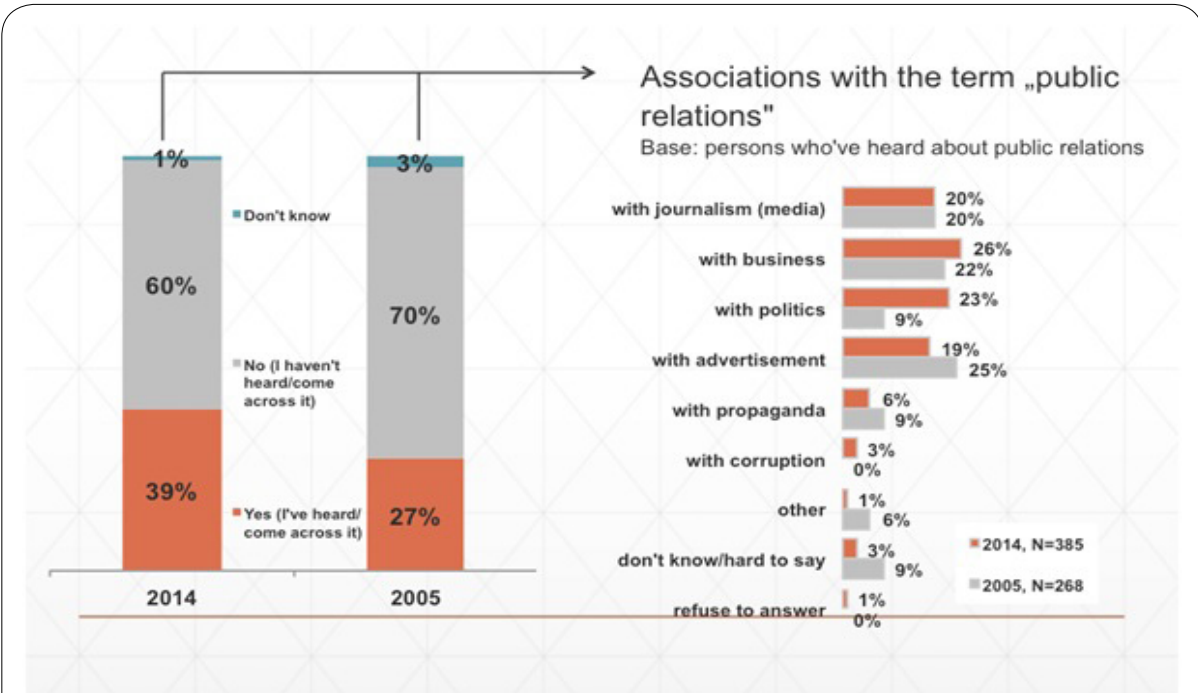


Figure 1: Familiarity with the term 'public relations'. Basis: N = 1000.

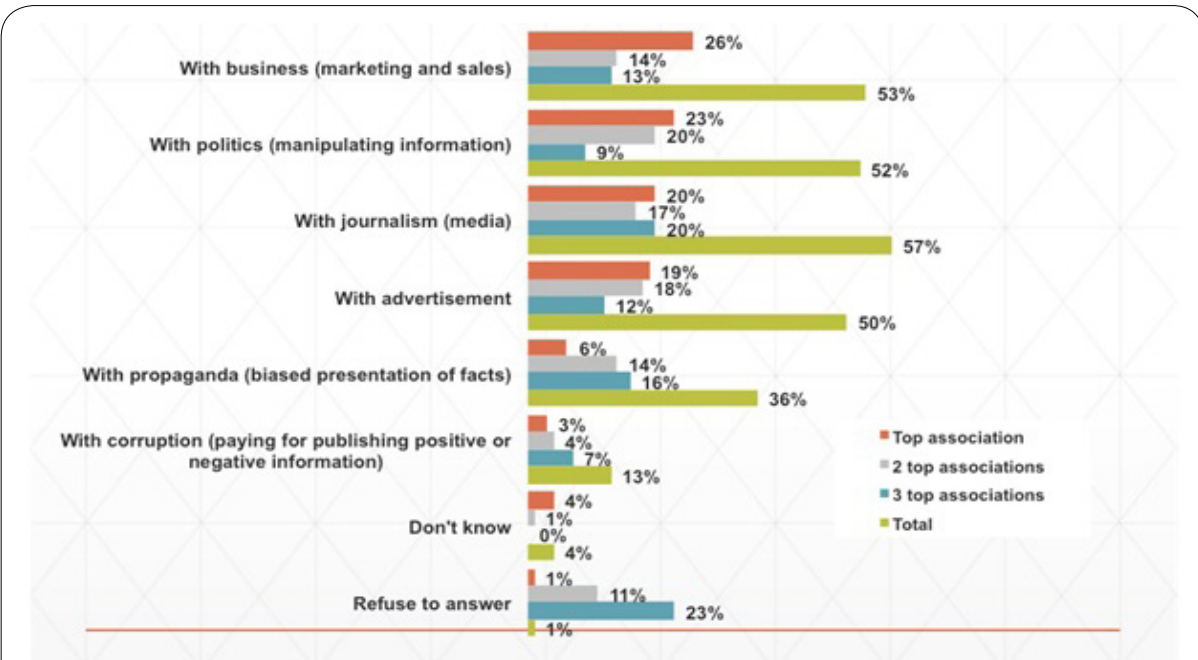


Figure 2: Associations with the term 'public relations'. N = 385.

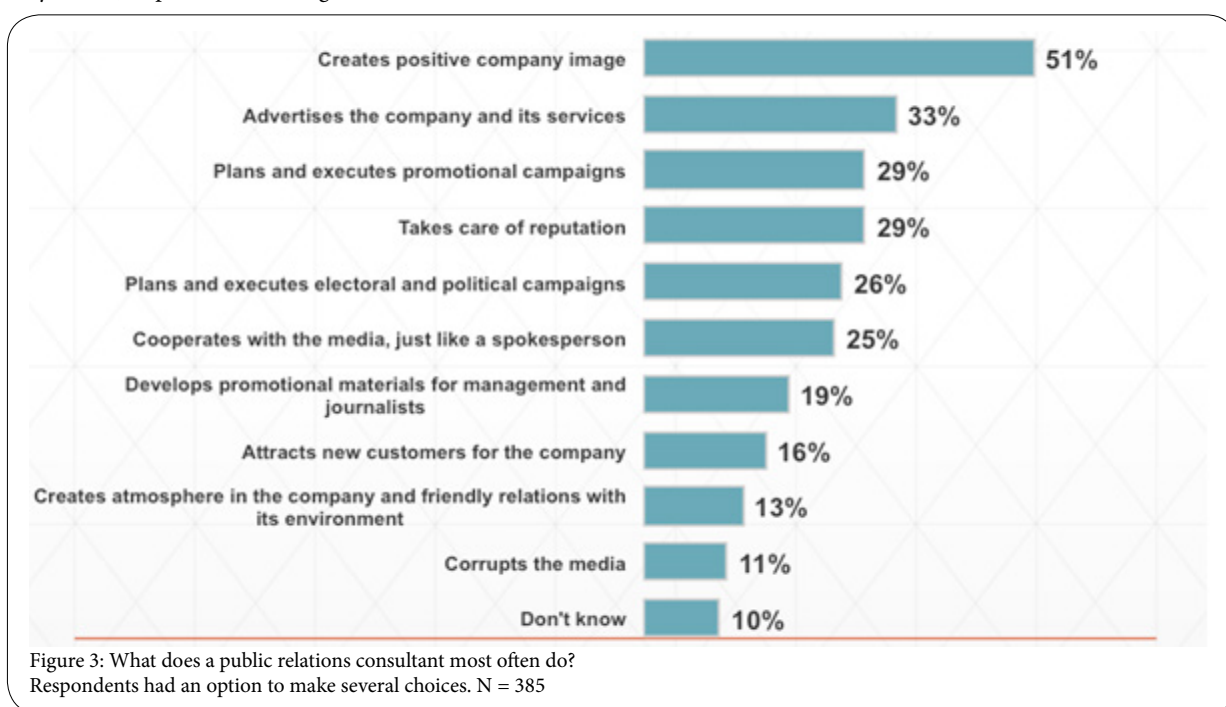
answers, it's mostly about promoting one's own image, and less often providing information (in a sense of more impartial communication with the public) about an organization's activities. Compared to the results of the survey conducted nine years earlier, we can see a major increase in critical comments about public relations being biased. According to those polled, it is advertising products (33%), manipulating information (30%), looking for connections and good contacts with journalists (19%) and talking them into publishing laudatory texts (16%) or taking part in disseminating negative opinions (8%). Less critical, but immersed in the pejorative context of self-advertisement, are the respondents' ideas of individuals working as public relations experts. The list of answers is headed by creating a positive image (51%) but one of the next answers is the experts' participation in advertising the company (33%). Other indicated tasks describe the actual list of duties performed by public relations professionals, and evidence a solid knowledge of the scope of potential tasks. They include (Cf. figure 3): planning and executing promotional campaigns, taking care of an organization's reputation, cooperating with the media as a spokesperson, or developing promotional materials. Hence, what can be observed is an ambivalence of attitudes of the population polled towards public relations in Poland. On the one hand, the activities of individuals who practice public relations are perceived negatively while the idea of tasks to be performed by public relations consultants is more objectified and based on the society's positive expectations of this form of social communication.

Nine years earlier, when asked who most often uses the services of public relations specialists, those polled indicated international corporations; at present these foreign institutions rank fourth after: politicians, marketing and advertising departments, and business people - Cf. figure 4. This clearly demonstrates the growing competitiveness of the domestic business and commercial organizations, and the social belief that Polish political circles use the marketing knowledge of PR experts when it comes to political communication. When comparing 2005 survey results, we can see in 2014 actors and wealthy people in general as the new customers (previously absent) of public relations agencies.

Conscious observers of the media discourse in Polish mass media may get an impression - especially in a period of hot debates between national politicians and numerous commentators - that we are surrounded by a world nearly created by public relations experts. Especially Prime Minister Donald Tusk used to be suspected by opposition parties of surrounding himself with and using services of promotion specialists, and the deputy Prime Minister of the Civic Platform - Polish Peasants Party coalition government actually said on 17 February 2014 that she "will not speak in elegant words, polished by PR people, (because -J.O.'s note), I never lie, I always tell the truth." Such opinions can perfectly fit in with the pattern of shifting the blame for emergencies onto unidentified objects, socially associated with negative ethnic or professional stereotypes, for example agitators, propagandists or PR people. We asked in our survey if the term 'public relations' is not overused on national media. It turns out that nearly half of Polish residents polled are already weary of how often this name is used.

After so many media accounts of dirty techniques used to discredit political opponents or rivals vying for the same gainful position, and, when it comes to the economic sphere, after a wave of denunciations, wire taps and other methods of unfair market competition, the term 'black PR' has become the buzzword for manipulating information, false intrigues or lies. We asked our respondents about 'black PR'. Those polled are able to define the meaning of this term, which in their opinion (Cf. figure 5) brings to mind defaming competitors and rivals, slandering, diverting attention from one's own mistakes and failures or for some is a symbol of negative propaganda, which term, by the way, seems to be the most adequate word for this kind of information manipulations aimed to arouse hatred or at least dislike to other people - an aim of communication which is definitely opposite to what we have in public relations.

When we conducted a survey on Poland's population's opinion on public relations in 2005, we learnt that for 70% of those surveyed the term had good or rather good associations. Only for 13% they were bad or rather bad. Figure 6 indicates that in nine years the social image



of public relations in Poland significantly deteriorated. At present, as many as 27% of those polled have bad or rather bad associations with this concept.

Both in media discourse and in colloquial vocabulary the PR abbreviation is more common than the full name 'public relations'. PR man, PR image, PR tricks and similar epithets seem to best solidify in the popular opinion the image of a propagandist and adman, who can easily create soap bubbles about the many advantages of the institution, person, leader, celebrity, businessman he describes, sounding so credible that the audience is unable to find traces of manipulation. The full name 'public relations' not only requires knowledge about the

right pronunciation, but it can also be the identifying mark of a person who considers himself or herself an expert in human communication. We asked our respondents which term sounds more serious, in their opinion. Their answers were not surprising - 74% of those polled definitely favoured public relations as a name that is more likeable than the PR abbreviation. This result is probably the most practical hint for which term should be most often used at all universities, if we want to teach about professional public relations and inspire trust in our communication activities. The PR abbreviation, popular in many circles, becomes a synonym of shallow self-promotion, cheap advertisement, loud publicity and propaganda noise.

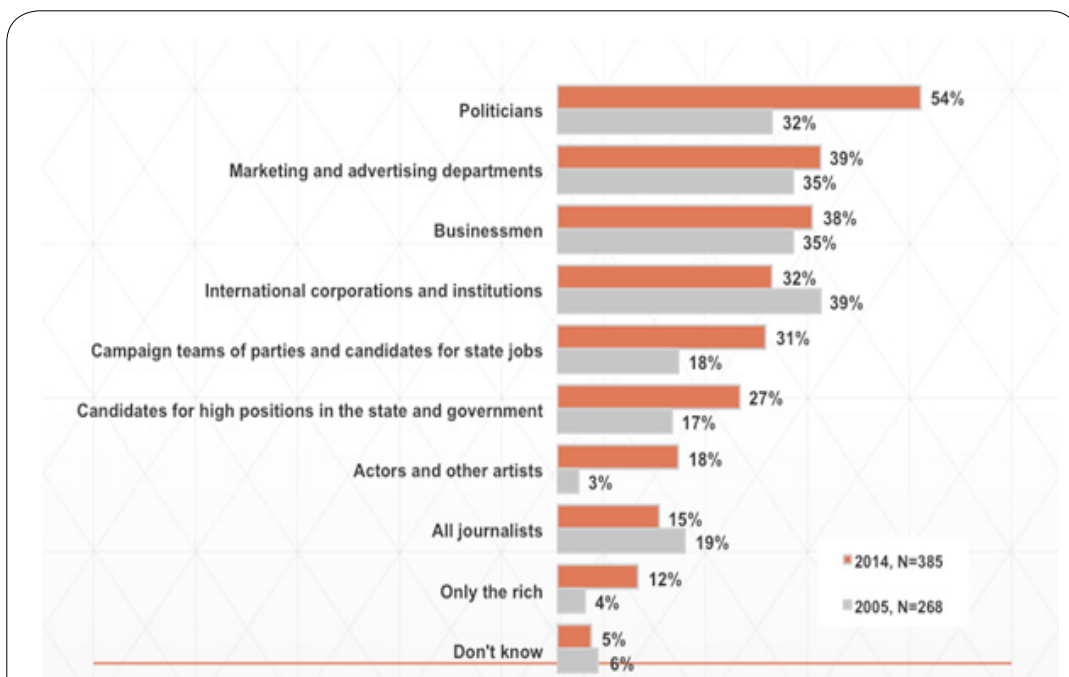


Figure 4. Who mostly uses the services of 'public relations' consultants or companies? Respondents had an option to make several choices. N = 385 Source: Author's own based on surveys by GfK Polonia.

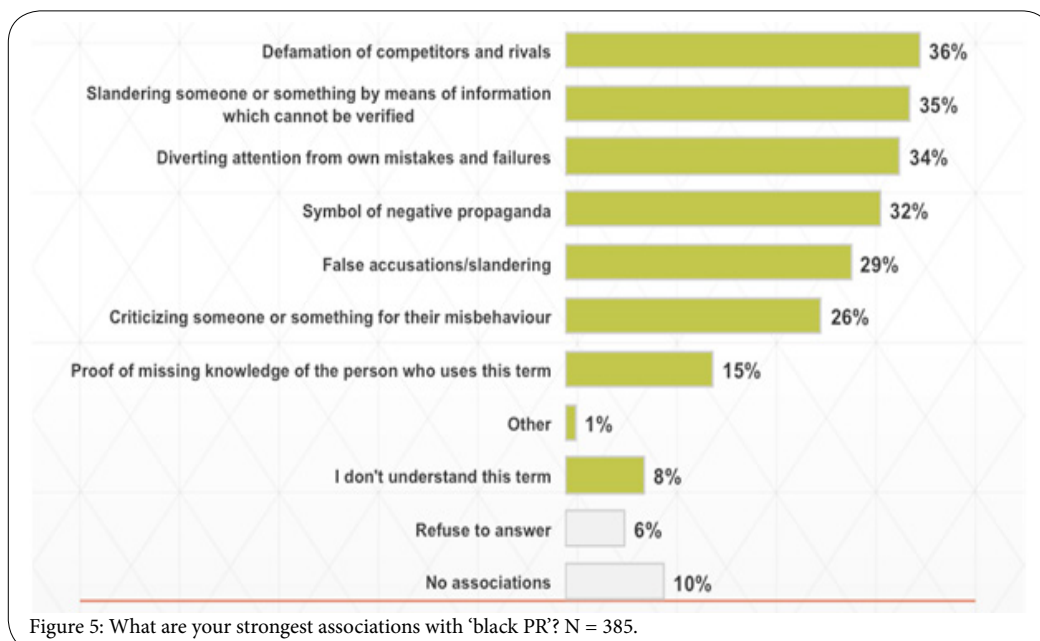


Figure 5: What are your strongest associations with 'black PR'? N = 385.

Summary

The survey results obtained lead to at least several conclusions:

1. In Poland PR is associated with promotional PR activities in the area of politics, business, advertisement and propaganda;
2. Public relations involve promoting a positive image of companies or people, or informing about their activity. This is tantamount to advertising products, organizations, as well as manipulating the information about them;
3. Customers of PR companies mainly include politicians, businessmen and candidates for state or governmental positions;
4. Compared to our first studies in 2005 we recorded an almost 50% increase in the percentage of respondents who claim that they know the term 'public relations' (from 27 to 39 percentage points). At the same time, the image of PR significantly deteriorated. In 2005 13% of respondents had bad and very bad associations, while in 2014 as many as 27% of respondents did (among those claiming to know this term);
5. The concept of 'black PR' is predominantly associated with defamation or slandering competitors and rivals, as well as diverting public attention from own mistakes and failures
6. Respondents have a much better opinion of the term 'public relations' and respect it more than the 'PR' abbreviation, which, according to the survey, is associated with biased presentation of many different, not always truthful pieces of information.

Both traditional and digital mass media (we are already dealing with many digital sources and social media strongly participating in social communication) show mostly ignorance of the social significance of the term 'public relations'. In those accounts, it's hard to see their authors as qualified to voice their opinion, which would allow them to competently analyse and evaluate the state of social communication.

Rather than promote knowledge about the significance of public relations in civic society of every democratic country, media publish countless materials where the term PR is often used only in the

context of events that bring negative or scandalous connotations. This is caused by dreadful statements of politicians and all kind of spin doctors, equally incompetent in this respect, who, jointly with journalists, treat us to dramatic comments, for example, about buffoonery of political celebrities. To the ordinary man in the street, it seems funny and reassuring to know there are people who are dumber and more ridiculous than him, but by no means do these accounts make it easier to understand the essence of public relations. Unfortunately, both media and politicians, when commenting on the activities of all (i.e. their own and that of the opposition) public life participants, use an extremely emotional and negative rhetoric, forcing media consumers to understand the term 'public relations' in line with the so called group think, focusing all attention on the proverbial bell ringing rather than on what this bell is ringing about, or in isolation from the context of obvious facts and events.

The observation of public relations experts' activities and of the public opinion that evaluates these activities reminds me of the famous Erving Goffman's reflections on the theatre of everyday life [6]. As we can remember, more than fifty years ago this American sociologist attempted to analyse a society and human behaviours, comparing human beings to theatre actors who perform according to previously prepared roles and scripts, and can choose among different masks and roles. The goal is to gain acclaim and support of the audience. Doesn't the PR man's image presented here strike you as similar to those Goffman's characters? Aren't PR men co-authors of the 'theatre of everyday life'? They write a script for that play, they look for producers and get paid for that job by politicians, business people and other wealthy people who wish to control their image. This metaphor of media theatre, which is the image of public relations concept, is deeply embedded in the subconscious of people who see media as a stage with actors putting masks on their faces to avoid showing their true face to the audience.

Even a cursory look at the content of some press titles or news services at radio and TV stations gives rise to a suspicion that the topics and opinions presented there are similar, and suggest to the audience and readers the same problems worth reflecting on. Among

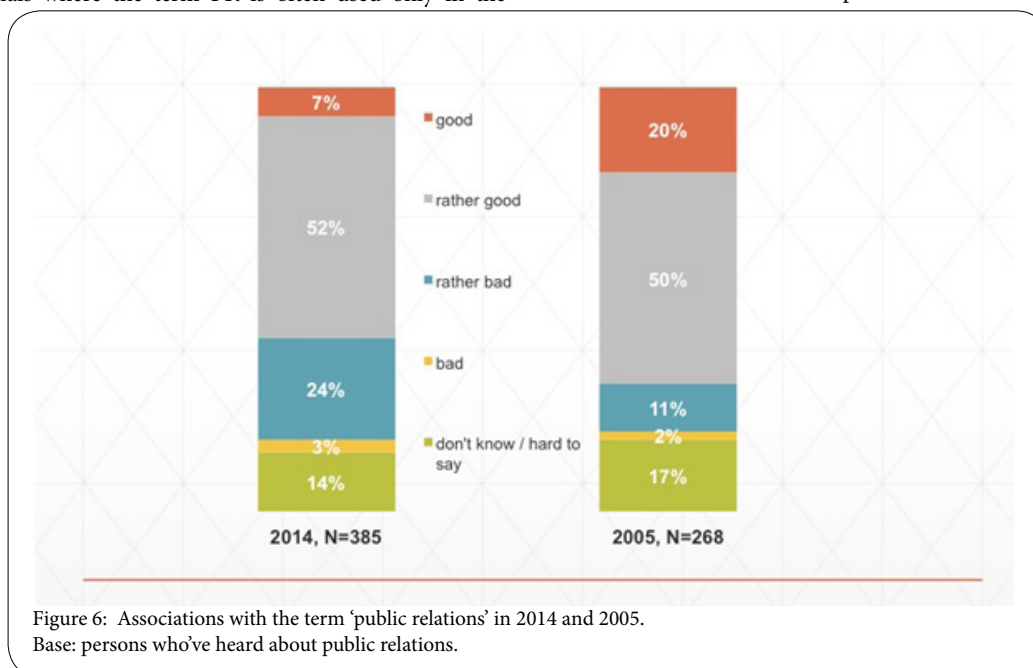


Figure 6: Associations with the term 'public relations' in 2014 and 2005. Base: persons who've heard about public relations.

us media specialists we refer to these issues as media agenda-setting [7] or media spinning [8], and they seem to be a generally used method of media influencing public opinion and the media content in the communication process, not only when it comes to politics.

As a consequence of such media practices, nearly all of us focus mainly on promotional and advertising stunts pulled by media directors whose actions follow the description of E. Goffman, rather than on evaluating respective activities, or the often poor results of work for the common good, which we expect from politicians. The term 'PR' has become in Poland, and probably also in many other countries of the world, a descriptive cliché for this political and media propaganda syndrome involving self-glorification and lack of self-criticism among politicians; it has become a symbolic and trendy epithet which deprives the opponents and rivals of all morality, a groundless accusation of lack of ethical principles, dysfunctional stereotype that presents rivals as careerists not worth talking to or, even less so, reaching any agreement with. Media, sadly, nurture this immoral politicians' behaviour as they have an interest, to reach their vital marketing targets, in materials and topics that dramatize an event by confronting people enmeshed in disputes and conflicts, because by constantly adding fuel to them, they increase press audience and readership. As a result of this rhetoric cooperation between politicians and media, the negative stereotype of public relations is used for ends that are fundamentally alien to the basic tenets of public relations. The question is who should be responsible for the media education of such different audiences and so many reading publics, so they could learn to look with suspicion at the entire media content and treat nearly all TV shows and electronic media content and texts in printed press the same way they treat all commercials broadcasted in advertising blocks or posted on advertising columns?

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interest exists.

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