

The image of public relations in Polish society

KEY WORDS

public relations, promotion tools, image of public relations, PR image, GfK Polonia

ABSTRACT

This article analyses current opinions on the image of public relations among the adult population in Poland. The study is based on the results of nationwide research conducted at the initiative of the author by GfK Polonia in March 2014. The results of this survey were compared with similar survey that used the same method back in 2005. The author points out the deterioration of PR's image within Polish society in the last decade and further indicates why public relations in Poland is mainly associated with non-ethical techniques of advertising and propaganda.

The paper will be based on three hypotheses¹:

(1). The progress of civilization results in increased requirements and expectations regarding communication: we want to live in a better world and know more in order to feel safe.

(2). The perception of public relations as primarily a marketing and promotional tool has resulted in depreciating the positive meaning of the term and its negative association with propaganda.

(3). The vague framework for the functioning of public relations services in the Polish market, heterogeneity of the professional circle, wide range of clients' expectations, and blurred responsibility for the undertaken actions are the reasons why in every day practice PR is associated with socially unacceptable activities (e.g. slandering the competitors, buying the opinion of the media, using lies, corruption, dishonest advertising, or propaganda, etc.).

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The prosocial philosophy of public relations

The correct meaning of the concept of public relations, which became an integral part of social communication worldwide in the first half of the 20th century, has been lost in media discourse. The term refers, in fact, to the communication between every organization and its environment, or stakeholders. The information process should be conscious, planned and organised; it should prevent potential crises and overcome the barriers in communication between people. The underlying principle of public relations is an open and friendly contact with people based on respect towards another human being, i.e. acknowledging their rights and points of view that are subjected to social criticism and require modification. The word “public” is of special importance here: the nature of communication should not be closed, but rather public, open, and free of insincere intentions - it should always be aimed at winning recognition, friends, and supporters. At the same time, however, any unethical action which comes to light can destroy all positive effects of communication that have been previously achieved, and ruin the trust and reputation won by the information sender.

Many top global companies employ the above public relations philosophy as a permanent and important component of their company management policy, which allows the corporation to win and retain the social understanding and support necessary for implementation of its goals. To this end, they carry out opinion polls in order to adapt their tasks to the requirements of the environment and undertake such activities that enable better cooperation with the society. This planned and often persuasive communication is public in its nature, which means that it is available to everyone.

In the United States, the cradle of conscious public relations activities, PR has for over a hundred years helped the pluralistic society to make decisions and contribute to the mutual understanding between groups and institutions. Public relations promote building consensus between the society and politics with respect to all public matters. Thus, they serve all institutions: companies, trade unions, government departments, foundations, hospitals, educational and religious institutions, social organisations. The role of those institutions is to understand the attitudes and values of their audiences (a term synonymous with “target markets” or “target groups”), in order to establish the best possible relationship with them (and, consequently, to achieve their objectives). As a rule, public relations is understood by marketing specialists as persuasive communication targeting specific audiences. According to the specialists, the communication between a company and its surroundings consists of 4 elements: corporate identity signs as organisational symbols, institutional advertising, customer relationship programme, and publicity, i.e. cost-free information in the media

concerning the company, its products and services. Publicity is usually the responsibility of the public relations department. The authors writing about marketing point to its close links with PR, but, at the same time, emphasise that equating the two disciplines is a mistake since they have different objectives². The goal of marketing is to identify customers and specify their needs, develop products which will satisfy the needs and deliver them to the consumers. Meanwhile, it is not clear to everybody that PR is not merely a marketing tool of promotion, but a comprehensive action aimed at adapting the policy and decisions of the company's management to the expectations and interests of the public opinion; and if necessary, also shaping that opinion, maintaining positive relationship with all important social groups interested in the objectives and content of our information policy. Public relations is primarily concerned with protecting the company's reputation and cost-free (contrary to advertising) transmission by the sender of information about the company to various groups in its environment.

The origins of the public relations philosophy, as it is understood today, are to be found in late 18th century America in the atmosphere of debates concerning the drafts of the new state's constitution which was being written at that time. It is worth noting that this was a period of considerable popularity of the theories of social contract, natural law and liberal constitutional state. It is believed that the concept of public relations was mentioned by Thomas Jefferson in the context of his appeals for civic self-governance and his calls on the emerging democratic state institutions to build public trust and embrace responsibility. In 1882, Dorman Eaton, a lawyer, defined public relations as "establishing interpersonal relations for the public welfare". At that time, the concept was not associated with advertising, or the use of information to gain a personal or business advantage. It is worth to mention, that the world's first professional advertising agency was set up forty years earlier, in 1841, by Volney Palmer in Philadelphia³.

From 1900 to 1902, the first Publicity Bureaus were established in Boston and Washington. In 1904, Ivy Lee created the first public relations agency in the world. He spoke about the need to reject dishonest journalism, scheming and plotting in favour of information based on true facts. The language of "battle fields", he wrote in 1906, should be replaced by the efforts to "frankly, and openly, on behalf of business concerns and public institutions, to

² See e.g.. K. Wojcik, *Public relations. Wiarygodny dialog z otoczeniem* [Public Relations: A reliable dialogue with the environment], Warszawa 2013.

³ In 1849, his agency claimed to be representing 1,300 newspaper titles out of approx. 2,000 titles published in the USA at that time, c.f.: http://www.dsignhistory.org/Advertising_pages/FirstAd.html [accessed: 14 Nov. 2015].

supply the press and public of the United States prompt and accurate information concerning subjects which it is of value and interest to the public to know about. This is not a secret press bureau. All our work is done in the open. We aim to supply news. This is not an advertising agency”⁴.

Although Ivy Lee understood communication as a one-way transmission of messages and his theory lacks the concept of feedback, he established the fundamental principle of reliable information. According to him and the other father of PR - Edward Bernays - being a PR specialist is a profession that requires university education. With the huge amounts of information we receive each day, there is a natural demand for reliable and professional PR specialists who can cooperate with all addressees of PR messages. Thus, the first schools of professional PR are established. At that time, public relations is not seen as a marketing tool of promotion, but rather as the practice of various techniques of public propaganda.

In my opinion, those facts indicate that it is only thanks to the emergence of industrial production, urbanisation, technologies fostering invention, and growth of readership (in the 19th century, all those factors were mutually dependent and stimulated the citizens’ access to all media) that we can speak of the United States as the homeland of consciously conducted public relations activities. Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, we can say that those countries that do not have a free economic market, free and monopolised media (including the Internet), and where the free flow of information and freedom of expression are not guaranteed by the law, do not offer any chances for the development of public relations. If any of those stimulants are missing, we can speak of a monopoly of propaganda institutions and commercial advertising. Public relations should be understood as conscious and purposeful management of the public image in the interest of an organisation, or any other group of people, involving primarily communication activities aimed at establishing positive relations with the environment. Above all else, it is a communication activity (although not devoid of marketing tools and means of capturing people’s attention) which focuses on shaping the image of that group or the brand of institutions, or social, professional, and religious organisations (etc.), as well as helping to build their reputation and strengthen friendly relations with the environment.

A public image is the colourful picture, or idea that one or more audiences have about themselves, other groups or institutions. This is not a real picture, defined precisely and in detail, but rather a mosaic of many details captured accidentally, in a fragmented form, with

⁴ F.P. Seitel, *Public relations w praktyce* [Practice of public relations], Warszawa 2003, p. 33.

blurred differences. However, the image of an organisation is not in itself the main purpose of public relations activities, because an efficient and long-term functioning of an institution depends not so much on its image, but rather on its reputation, i.e. an intangible asset of an organisation which is produced by the synergy of all activities of that organisation. They include: work culture at that institution, consumer rating of the products or services, opinions and behaviour of the employees, management culture, opinions of the investors, customers, media and various audiences or interested parties expressing their views on that organisation, thereby affecting its image and consequently shaping the reputation of that institution.

The expectations placed on public relations specialists are higher than those placed on promotion and image specialists. They are expected not only to be experts in mediation, negotiations with stakeholders, or intermediaries in communication between the organisation and its environment, but also to be able to constantly monitor the society's behaviour and identify particular groups which should be targeted with messages. The monitoring process is associated with conducting scrupulous research concerning the opinions, attitudes, and behaviours, as well as the knowledge about the organisation among all stakeholder groups, both the current and potential ones. As a result, the basic method of activity involves a dialogue, i.e. bilateral communication whose symmetry is ensured not only by listening to the stakeholders, but also, which is more innovative and difficult, by adapting the organisation to the expectations of its environment. In the 21st century, we have the right to expect that organisations and companies show greater responsibility towards the society - a certain degree of integration with the expectations, behaviours and attitudes.

Nationwide opinion poll by GfK Polonia

In 2006, two researchers with PR experience, Robert L. Heath and Timothy W. Coombs, wrote that defining public relations merely as building the image of an organisation diminishes and caricatures the concept, which results in many PR practitioners being perceived as liars who adjust even true information to serve the purposes of image-building, with the sole aim of achieving the desired effect⁵. As a result of disregarding the role of reputation, the social significance of the concept of “public relations” is far from the ideals on which it was originally based. A similar conclusion can be reached by looking at the results of the nationwide opinion poll conducted by GfK Polonia from 6th to 9th March 2014, based on a representative non-anonymous sample of Poles aged 15+, randomly selected from the PESEL

⁵ R.L. Heath, W.T. Coombs, *Today's Public Relations: An Introduction*, London 2006, p. 7.

(personal identification number) database⁶. The target individuals were selected on the basis of a two-stage stratified sampling scheme, with a total number of conducted interviews N = 1020. The surveys were completed through face-to-face interviews in the respondents' homes using the CAPI technique. The research was carried out with the financial support from the vortal Proto.pl, which helped us with conducting a similar study in November 2005 when we also used the services of GfK Polonia⁷.

The set of questions was almost identical to that employed nine years earlier, which allowed us to compare the answers and track the changes in the respondents' opinions. As it turned out, the research approach produced successful results. The graphs presented in this paper contain the results of both studies, and the accompanying commentaries draw special attention to the obvious differences in opinions and evaluations provided by the respondents.

The recent research has shown that the number of Poles who claim familiarity with the term "public relations" increased significantly from 27% in 2005 to 39% in 2014 (see Fig. 1). Over those several years, there has been an increase in the number of people who primarily associate public relations with business activity and politics, with a simultaneous decrease in the number of associations with propaganda and advertising. Instead, however, a new negative association appeared, i.e. linking public relations with corruption. In Poland, public relations is strongly associated mainly with marketing and sales, as well as the activity of the political circles which are often suspected of manipulating information. This naturally also applies to journalists and the media, including advertising, as a whole system of communication (see Fig. 2).

The increase in familiarity with the notion of PR seems to be uniform in all groups classified according to the level of education and occupation pursued. However, it is noteworthy that the youngest generation of respondents showed a significant decrease in interest in PR (see Fig. 3).

⁶ I would like to express special thanks to Mr Maciej Siejewicz and Ms Julia Sapocińska from GfK Polonia for their voluntary organisation of the research.

⁷ Cf. J. Olędzki, D. Tworzydło, *Public relations. Znaczenie społeczne i kierunki rozwoju* [Public relations: Social importance and directions of development], Warszawa 2006, pp. 37-44.

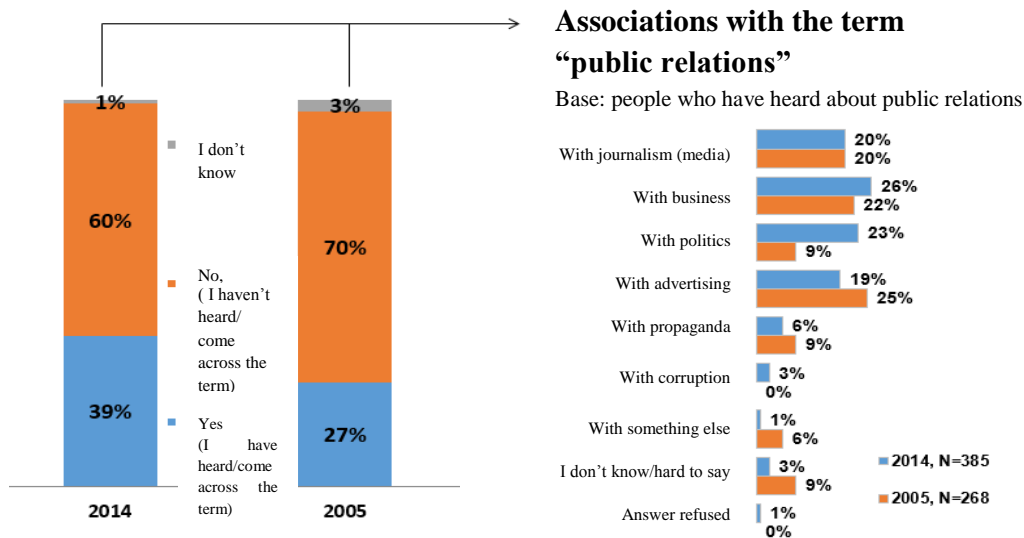


Figure 1. Familiarity with the term “public relations” (base: N = 1000)

Source: own work based on research conducted by GfK Polonia

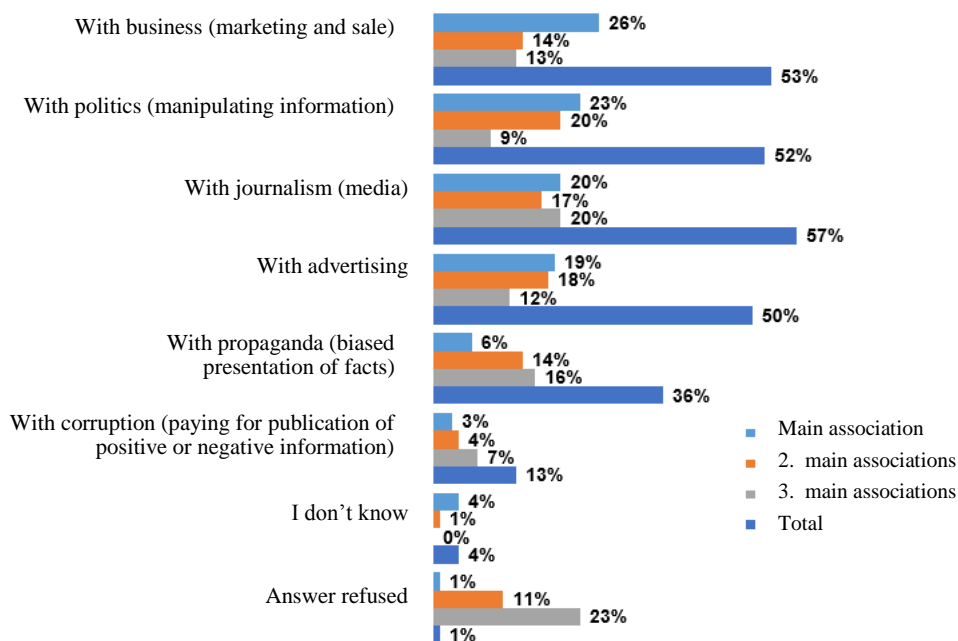


Figure 2. Associations with the concept “public relations” (N = 385)

Source: own work based on research conducted by GfK Polonia

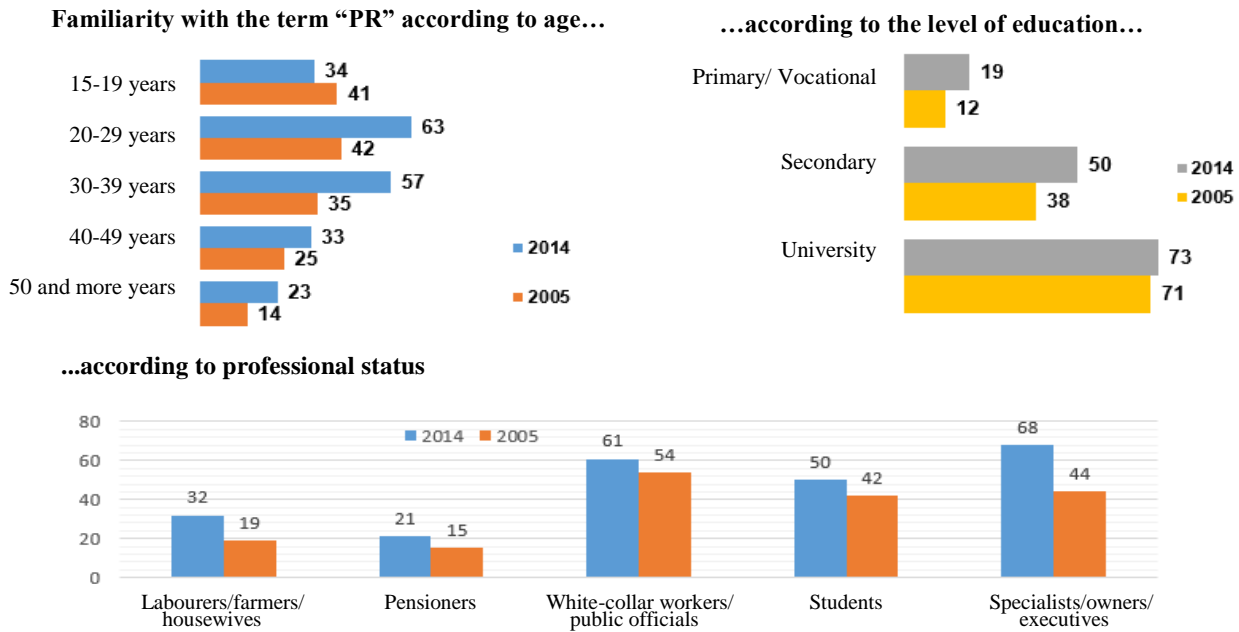


Figure 3. Familiarity with the term “public relations” according to the respondents’ age, education and professional status

Source: own work based on research conducted by GfK Polonia

According to the respondents, the activity referred to as PR practice means primarily the promotion of an organisation and protecting its reputation (see Fig. 4 - the respondents could select multiple answers). Every third respondent pointed to the one-sidedness of the evaluations - presenting only the positive features and omitting negative behaviours of an organisation.

Self-advertisement and self-praise

The lack of objectivity in public relations is reflected in another two critical opinions according to which PR practice involves self-advertisement and unfounded self-praise. Such perception of public relations is still valid in 2014, which is confirmed by the replies to the next question concerning the description of the concept of “public relations”. Public relations is thus primarily understood as the promotion of a positive image, less frequently as the provision of information (in the sense of impartial communication with the environment) about an organisation’s activity (see Fig. 5). Compared with the results of the survey done nine years ago, there has been a significant increase in critical opinions concerning the bias in public relations. According to the respondents, public relations involve product advertising (33%), information manipulation (30%), establishing acquaintance and good relations with

journalists (19%), persuading journalists to publish laudatory texts (16%), or taking part in the dissemination of negative opinions (8%). Less critical comments, although occurring in the pejorative context of self-advertisement, were expressed by the respondents with respect to the tasks of public relations specialists. The list of answers provided to that question starts with the creation of a positive image (51%), followed by the involvement of PR specialists in a company's advertising activity (33%). The remaining tasks mentioned by the respondents describe the actual list of duties of PR professionals and attest to the sound knowledge of the scope of potential tasks. Those include (see Fig. 6): planning and execution of promotional campaigns, protecting the organisation's reputation, cooperation with the media as a spokesperson, preparing promotional materials. Thus, a considerable duality can be observed in the surveyed population with respect to the attitudes towards public relations in Poland. On the one hand, the respondents are critical of the activity of public relations practitioners. On the other hand, the perception of the tasks that should be performed by PR consultants is more objective and based on positive expectations of the society towards that form of social communication.

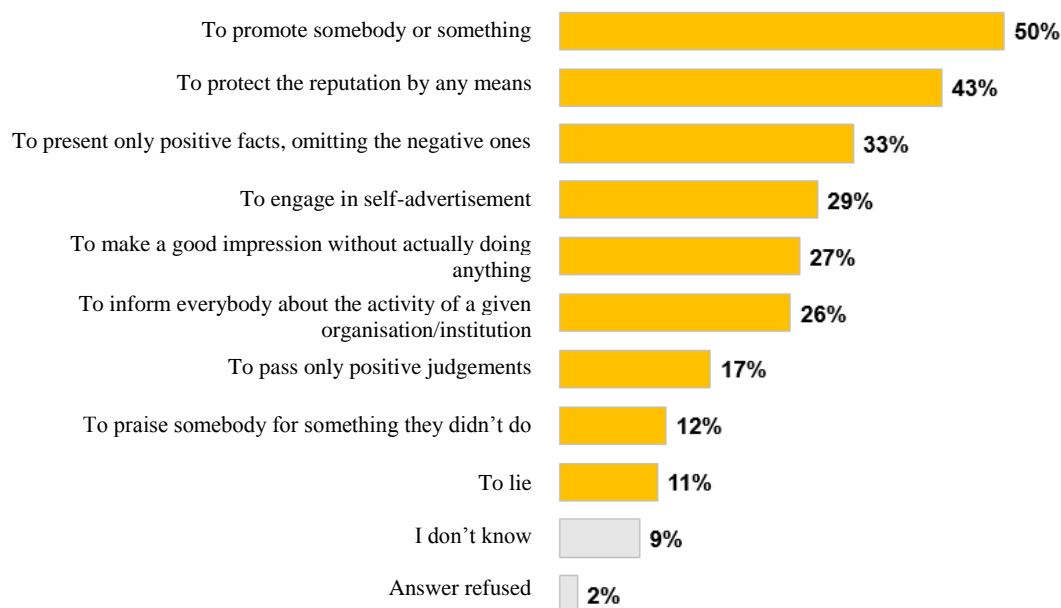


Figure 4. What, in your opinion, is the meaning of the expression “to practise PR”? (aggregate data concerning three main associations; base: people who have heard about public relations, N=385).

Source: own work based on research conducted by GfK Polonia

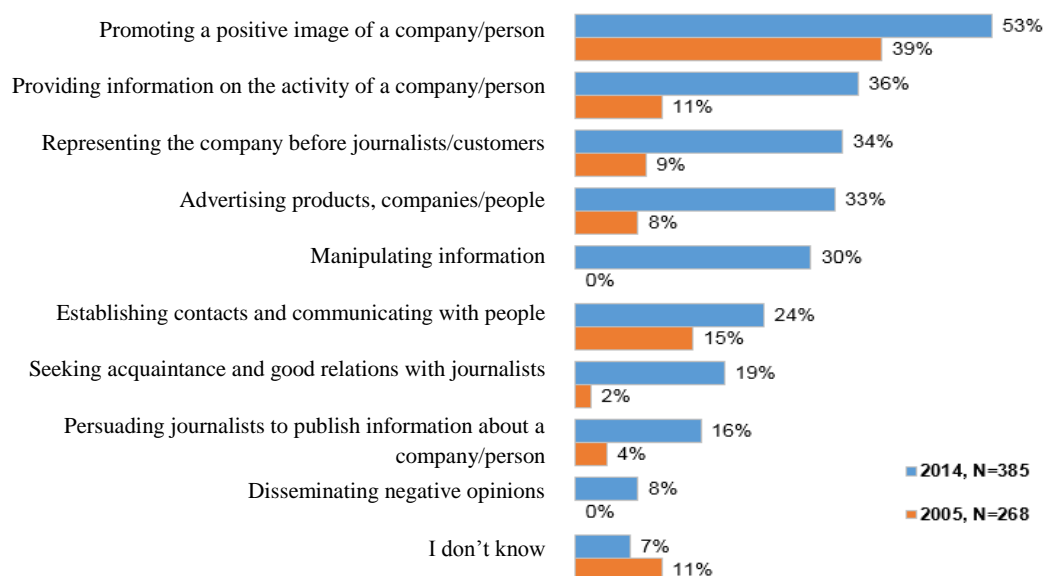


Figure 5. What does the public relations activity primarily involve?

Source: own work based on research conducted by GfK Polonia

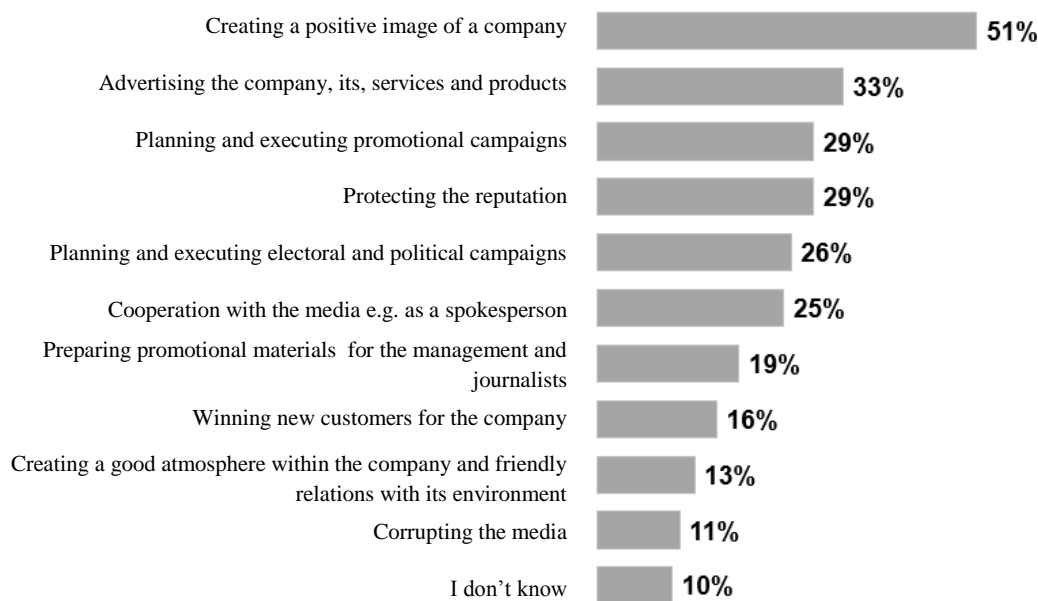


Figure 6. What does the job of a public relations specialist usually involve? (the respondents could select multiple answers, N = 385)

Source: own work based on research conducted by GfK Polonia

Nine years earlier, in reply to the question about the main users of the services provided by PR specialists, the respondents indicated international companies. Currently,

international institutions occupy the fourth position, after politicians, marketing and advertising departments, and business people (see Fig.7). This is a clear sign of the growing competitiveness of the domestic businesses and commercial organisations, as well as of the public conviction that the Polish political circles use the marketing knowledge of PR specialists for the purposes of political communication. When we compare the results of this study with those reported in 2005, we will notice that new (previously absent) clients of public relations agencies emerged in 2014, such as actors and well-to-do people.

Conscious observers of the Polish mass media discourse can get the impression that, especially during the heated debates involving Polish politicians and numerous commentators, we are surrounded by a world that has almost entirely been designed by public relations specialists. In particular, the Prime Minister of Poland, Donald Tusk, has been suspected by the opposition parties of surrounding himself with and using the services of promotion specialists. On top of that, on 17 February 2014, the Deputy Prime Minister of the Civic Platform and Polish Peasant Party coalition government simply said that she “will not use the fine words smoothed out by PR specialists since [addition by J.O], I never lie, I always tell the truth”. Such opinions perfectly fit into the pattern of putting the blame for the existing crisis situations on unidentified objects associated by the society with negative ethnic or professional stereotypes, such as agitators, propagandists or PR practitioners. Our respondents were asked whether the term “public relations” is overused by the national media. It turns out that nearly half of the surveyed Polish population are tired of the frequency with which the term is used (see Fig. 8). The percentage of people who are not annoyed by it is lower.

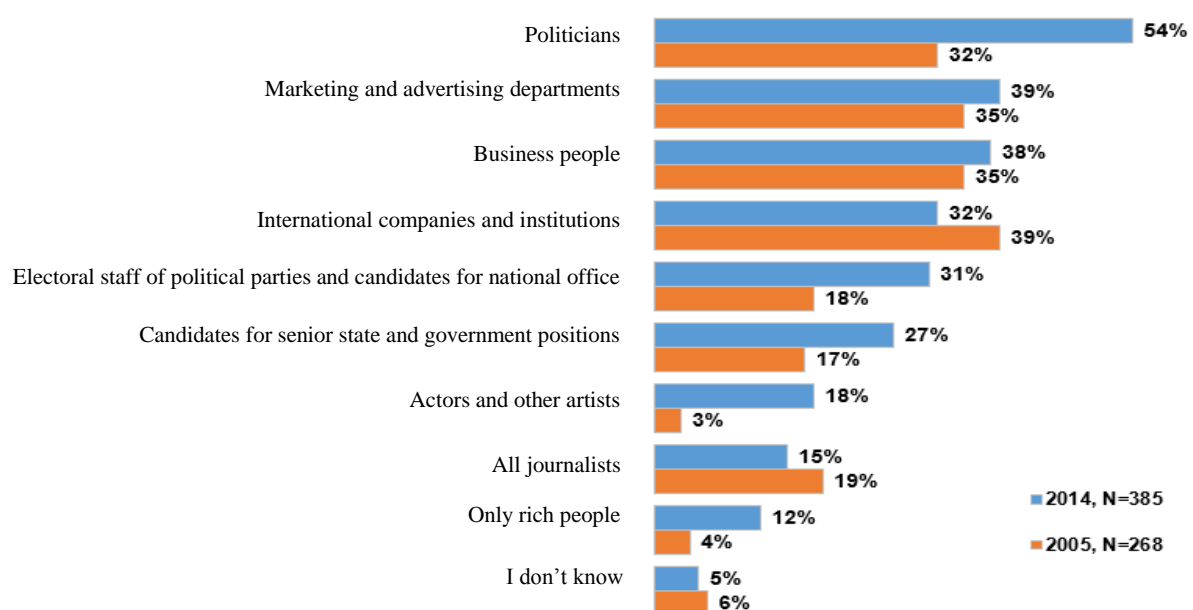


Figure 7. Who are the main users of the services provided by PR specialists or agencies? (the respondents could select multiple answers, N = 385)

Source: own work based on research conducted by GfK Polonia

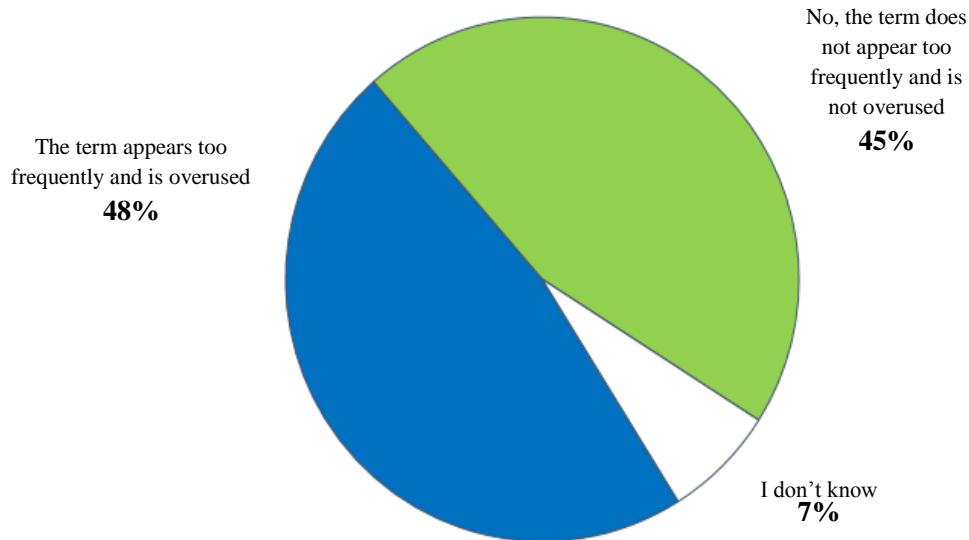


Figure 8. Is the term “public relations” which appears in the media and language of public figures used too frequently or not? N = 385)

Source: own work based on research conducted by GfK Polonia

After so many media reports concerning the dirty tricks used to discredit political competitors or rival candidates for profitable state positions, and in the economic sphere - in the wake of denunciation, wiretaps and other methods of unfair market rivalry, the term “black PR” has become the buzzword signifying the manipulation of information, fabricated intrigues and lies. We asked our respondents’ opinions about “black PR”. It turns out that the respondents can correctly identify the meaning of the term which in their opinion (see Fig. 9) is associated with defamation of competitors and rivals, denigration, diverting attention from own failures and defeats, or, to some people, is a symbol of negative propaganda. “Black PR” seems to be the most appropriate term to describe this kind of information manipulation which seeks to evoke hatred or, at least, animosity towards other people, i.e. to achieve a communication goal that is contrary to that postulated by public relations.

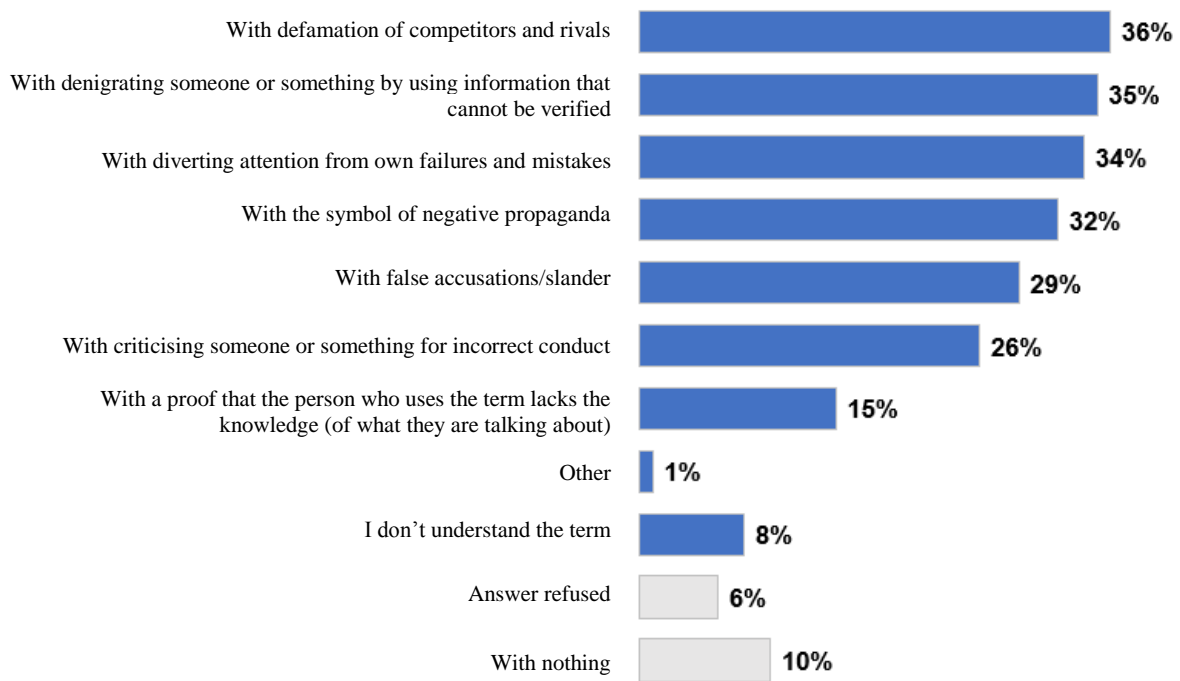


Figure 9. What do you primarily associate the term “black PR” with? (N=385)

Source: own work based on research conducted by GfK Polonia

The survey conducted in 2005 to investigate Polish people’s perceptions of public relations revealed that 70% of the respondents had positive, or rather positive associations with the term. Only 13% had negative, or rather negative associations. Figure 10 shows that the social perception of public relations in Poland has considerably deteriorated over those nine years. Currently, as many as 27% of the respondents have negative, or rather negative associations with this term.

PR is not necessarily public relations

Both the media discourse and colloquial language commonly use the abbreviation “PR” instead of the full term “public relations”. PR specialist, PR image, PR tricks and similar expressions seem to effectively strengthen the popular stereotype of a propagandist and an advertiser who can easily invent clever soap bubbles about the numerous advantages of an institution, individual, leader, celebrity, business person, which sound so credible that the audience do not realise they are being manipulated. The use of the full form “public relations” requires not only knowledge about the correct pronunciation, but can also be the identification sign of a person who considers themselves to be an expert in interpersonal communication. We asked our respondents which term, in their opinion, sounds more serious. The answers were

hardly surprising: 74% of the respondents strongly opted for public relations as a term which evoked more positive feelings than its abbreviation “PR”. The result is probably the most practical piece of advice as to which term should be used more frequently if we want to teach people about professional public relations and inspire confidence in our communication activities. The abbreviation “PR”, which is popular in many circles, becomes a synonym for shallow self-promotion, puffery, cheap publicity and propaganda hullabaloo.

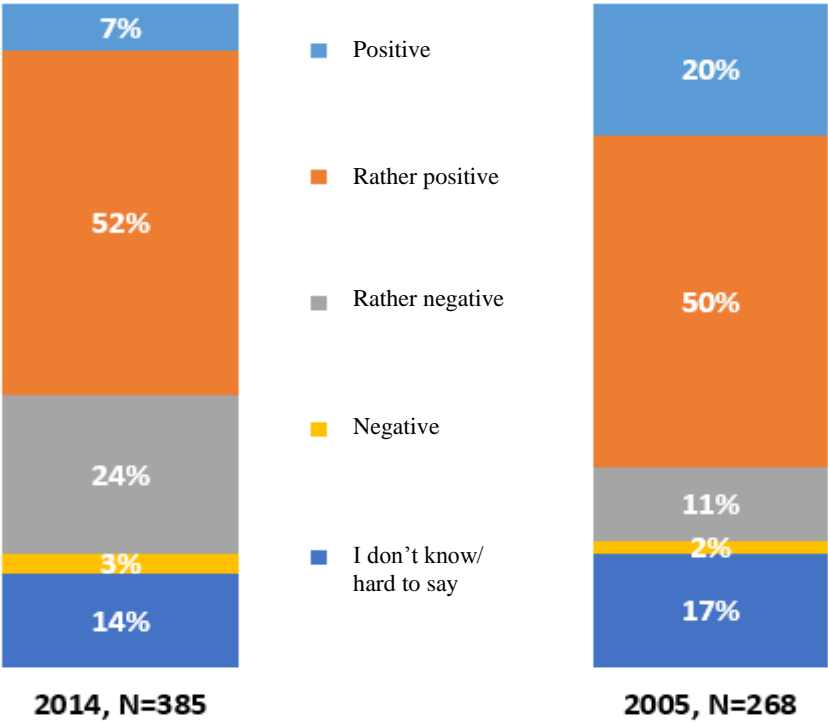


Figure 10. Associations with the term ”public relations” in 2014 and 2005 (base: people who have heard about public relations)

Source: own work based on research conducted by GfK Polonia

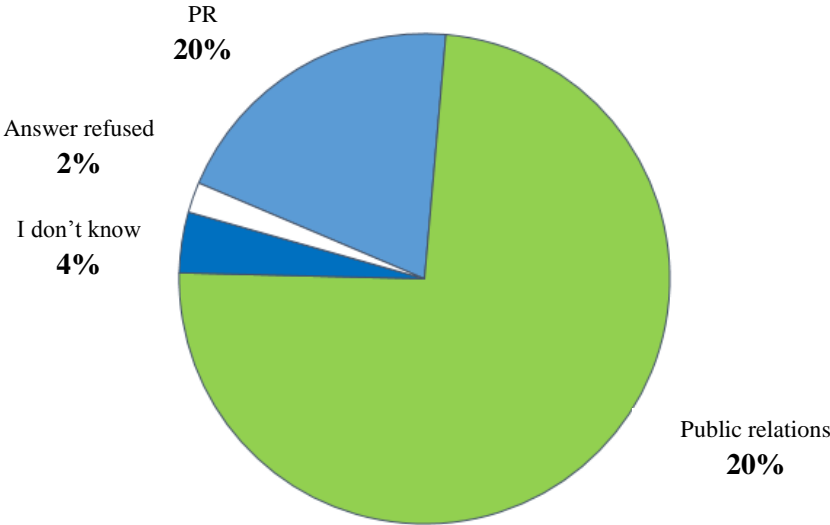


Figure 11. Public relations or PR? Which term sounds more serious in your opinion?

Source: own work based on research conducted by GfK Polonia

Summary

The research findings lead to the following conclusions:

- In Poland, public relations is associated with the promotional media activity related to politics, business, advertising and propaganda.
- In public perception, public relations involve promoting the positive image of a company or a person, or providing information on their activities. Public relations is similar to the advertising of products or organisations, as well as manipulating the information concerning those products and organisations.
- The main clients of PR agencies include politicians, business people, rich people, or candidates for state or government positions.
- Compared with the previous survey conducted in 2005, the percentage of people who claim familiarity with the term “public relations” has increased by half (from 27 to 39 percentage points). At the same time, the image of PR has considerably deteriorated over the years. In 2005, 13% of the respondents had negative or very negative associations with the term, as compared with 27% in 2014 (among the people reporting familiarity with the term).
- The concept “black PR” is primarily associated with defamation or denigration of competitors or rivals, and diverting the public opinion from own mistakes and failures.
- The respondents have a much more favourable opinion of and greater respect for the term “public relations” than its abbreviation “PR” which is often associated - as can be seen from the entire survey - with a biased presentation of a lot of different information that is not always true.

Both the traditional and digital mass media in Poland (we are witnessing an intensive participation of numerous digital sources and social media in public communication) essentially reveal the lack of knowledge about the social importance of that term. The authors of media reports do not seem to have any knowledge of the subject that would entitle them to voice their opinions and competently analyse and evaluate the status of public communication. Rather than drawing on knowledge about the importance of public relations in the civil society of a democratic country, the media recurrently present material in which the term PR is used exclusively in the context of negative or sensational events. This is the effect of the

unfortunate statements made by certain politicians with little competence in this matter and their spin doctors who jointly with journalists feed us with dramatic accounts of e.g. clownish behaviour of political celebrities, which to an average person may seem funny and reassure them that others are even stupider and more ridiculous than them, but those depictions do not in any way promote the understanding of the essence of public relations. Regrettably, in evaluating the activity of all participants of the public sphere (i.e. their own and that of the opposition), both the media and politicians employ highly emotional and negatively judgemental rhetoric, imposing on media consumers an understanding of the concept “public relations” in line with the group-think mechanism that focuses attention on the proverbial ringing of the bell, rather than on why the bell is ringing, i.e. in isolation from the context of obvious facts and events.

As a consequence, nearly all of us concentrate on the promotional and advertising tricks, rather than on evaluating specific actions, i.e. the often miserable results of working for the common good which we expect of our politicians. As a result, the term “PR” has become a buzzword describing the syndrome of political and media propaganda that involves self-glorification and lack of self-criticism among politicians. And to put it even more strongly - a symbolic and new-fashioned assessment depriving the opponents of any morality, making unfounded accusations about the lack of ethical principles, a dysfunctional stereotype portraying rivals as careerists who are not worth talking to, let alone entering into an agreement with. Unfortunately, the media foster the immoral behaviour of politicians, because the media themselves, in the name of viable marketing goals, are interested in materials and topics depicting the dramaturgy of events, which are obtained by confronting with each other people involved in disputes and conflicts. After all, constant stirring-up of the moods increases the audience and press readership. As a result of this rhetorical cooperation between politicians and the media, the negative stereotype of public relations is being used for purposes which are fundamentally different from the basic principles of that concept. An open question remains as to who should assume responsibility for media education of such different audiences of readers and viewers, so they learn to look at the entire media content with suspicion and treat nearly all programmes, electronic media content, articles in traditional press in a way similar to that in which they treat TV advertisements broadcast during commercial breaks, or published in advertising columns.

Finally, let us return for a moment to the marketing concept of public relations. It is worth stressing that PR activity, as a socially-oriented communication of an institution, points to a broader context of activity of every organisation. PR is sometimes regarded as a

management function (in a broader context), or promotional tool. In this way, companies want to support new product launches, or changes in the product placement, inspire interest in a specific product category, influence particular target groups, defend products which are not yet socially accepted and build the image of the entire company⁷. I would say that through public relations, an organisation seeks possibilities of entering into a dialogue with its environment in order to achieve mutual benefits.

It can be concluded that the greatest risk involved in the marketing approach to PR practice is the loss of public trust, which could be the potential consequence of the asynchronous development of the marketing-oriented PR. It is a known fact that people have become immune to marketing activities, are less sensitive to increasingly ingenious advertising tricks and stratagems, copywriters' imaginative ideas, crafty salesmen, or advertising frauds. We are already familiar with aggressive marketing, so there is reason to fear that soon, within the framework of marketing-oriented public relations, the idea of aggressive PR will emerge which will be used interchangeably with aggressive marketing. The notoriety surrounding marketing activities will thus be transferred to PR and public relations. This danger can be avoided if:

- the public relations circles display a high level of professional and ethical awareness;
- the competition within those circles grows, with a simultaneous rise of a strong consumer protection framework.
- there is a large variety of mass media operating in the free market which respect the principles of professional ethics.