



India

PR Country Landscape 2014

# Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management

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# Acknowledgments



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## Snapshot of the profession

The profession of public relations and communications has significantly advanced in India over the past 25 years, with major milestones achieved and complex challenges still to confront.

Experienced professionals in public relations describe origins that go back some 25 years. At that time, the profession was primarily an extension of the guest relations services of the Chairman's office of the Public Sector Undertakings. Those working in the profession at the time recall the profession was, generally, unorganized as it handled "mundane issues like receiving at airports, organizing transport and flowers and peddling media releases as delivery agents and media networking over dinner, as well as sharing highly sanitized information in the media." The somewhat disorganized profession did resolve bottlenecks and issues through personal relationships that often took "the shape of wining and dining media people to get necessary traction". The profession acquired its basic shape over the next 10 to 15 years even if it risked becoming subsumed by the country's rising advertising industry and was considered, by some, to be an extension for clients in print media who wanted coverage. As an offshoot to advertising offerings, public relations services were often "dangled as a carrot to gain more advertising from clients and big companies". While the profession was not strategic, by today's standards, it was used as a tool for announcements.

The challenges of recent years have, according to professionals, led public relations to evolve to a more strategic level with more consulting, knowledge-based sharing and digital communication as well as facilitation of corporate reaction to dramatic changes to the media landscape. While the focus on media visibility is a small part of the overall strategic objectives and deliverables of a typical public relations program, the profession has become more focused on how to scientifically and systematically build images using highly defined and sophisticated approaches. Such a focus on communication strategy now calls for a mix of a professional discipline and personal relationships with strong focus on reputation management, brand management and, to some extent, being "a harbinger of goodwill for an organization". As a result, the profession helps shore up the perceptions in a more emphatic manner than before.

As the profession has changed, so have suppliers. Currently, there is a strong move towards consulting in large public relations firms and giving strategic counsel in New Delhi and Mumbai, the key hubs for public relations in India. Other metro markets – including Chennai, Kolkatta, Bangalore and Hyderabad – still play catch-up with, as one practitioner observes, "pretensions of strategic counsel while still peddling media relations". New issues of digital media, social responsibility, stakeholder engagement and internal communications are becoming integral to the public relations array of services but "the process of change can be very slow".

# State of the profession

## Challenges

Overall, the profession lags in terms of a robust regulatory framework to govern its work and organize its skill development and training. Strengthening this foundation will help the profession advance from coordinating media relations and peddling media releases to offering strategic counsel. Professionals believe this shift from the tactical to the strategic will happen.

## Media

Professionals observe how the media can challenge the profession. In the quest to remain profitable, more media monetize the news quotient. Editorial services now link to the marketing wings of media outlets and, as one professional observed, “they call the shots”. As well, while public relations clients better understand the reach of the news that appears about them, they also become more ambitious in their requirements. This has, for client servicing personnel, created “a nightmare of sorts to manage client expectations” that can challenge a profession where the quality of professionals is a serious issue.

# Context for the profession

## Culture

The country's cultural heritage – with its diversity in culture, language and social norms – influences the state of the profession. Specifically, professionals observe more impact at the regional or vernacular media level than in mainline or metros. They report that the strength and impact of regional media has dramatically increased over the past 10 years as the influence of English mainstream media has waned and subscription and readership figures have dropped. While nothing “in particular restricts the freedom of the press or the spread of opinion,” according to professionals, the “diverse culture does impact the practice since local regional ethos tend to influence functioning”.

## Government

Policy and politics impact the growth and sustainability of the profession. Professionals note that slow decision making over the past few years, and “apparent policy paralysis at the Centre” has led to dipping investment sentiments and industrial growth that impact public relations. While this can have a negative impact, it can also lead to opportunities for public affairs and public relations professionals to help lobby for favorable policy making. As a result, political, business, legislative and other related issues become defining factors in how news is consumed and, more importantly, perceived by the target audience. With social media now challenging mainstream media to shore up perceptions, every little factor becomes a talking point. This creates a dynamic scenario that bursts with immense possibilities to connect with the target audience in multiple ways.

# Issues for the Profession

## Talent

The biggest challenge facing public relations in India is the lack of professional training. This reduces the pool of professional talent to meet the range and volume of challenges. This gap is compounded as well by religious, illiteracy and caste factors. Complicating this issue is a significant trust deficit between public relations professionals and their clients due to a lack of clarity on deliverables and expectations. As well, the debate of earned versus paid media – and, as a result, control over the message – tends to define the professional relationship between the key stakeholders, client and media.

## Legal

While the government is a body elected by the people, it often assumes, according to professionals, “a holier than thou attitude in their disposition” that leads government to “enforce draconian laws to curb the intensity of a certain news”. Putting out a tweet, for example, can lead to defamation cases asking for punitive damages or arrest warrants. At a macro level, government policies on industries as well as affiliated bodies indirectly influence the industry to change or accelerate the manner of operations. Professionals believe the role of government should be one of facilitation. But, as one says, “when it stretches its jurisdiction beyond is when problem starts,” directly referring to cases that ban access to social media. According to professionals, the new elected government of Prime Minister Modi appears to understand and value the role of communication. “This will, hopefully, trickle down the system”.

## Social

At the same time, corporate social responsibility has the ability to become an integral part of the public relations forum to advocate a keenness to give back to the society. The enactment of the Companies Bill legislation makes it mandatory for companies to contribute towards executing CSR activities. While this offers a lot of possibility for public relations professionals to participate in strategic counsel, the larger opportunity is the linkage of CSR to reputation management and brand. The ability to integrate this act with a company’s brand can potentially strengthen how public relations professionals are seen as strategic counsel.

After the passage of the Companies Bill, social responsibility and sustainability have become central to corporations who look for help to formulate CSR strategies as well as calibrate their communications. Unlike the West, however, CSR is seen as optional in India and has, as a result, yet to reach its growth potential even though it may become mandatory for industries to actively participate to ensure a uniform rate of growth for the country. “While many companies like the TATAs have voluntarily participated in shouldering this responsibility,” says one professional, “others look at it as a publicity gaining avenue thereby impacting the profession”.

## Business

A new space for public relations is with businesses that face unique communications challenges in their sectors. These may be policy related or brand and customer centric issues. Given the demands of such clients, many communication firms now divide into core practice areas with experts working and advising clients on such issues. This leads to new levels of specialization public relations. Changes in business fuel the growth of public relations. As one professional observes, “the cut throat competition and volatile market situation in a country such as ours dictates that every bit of news is camouflaged and made to sound like good news”. As a result, public relations professionals have to sense the requirement, alter the story line, pitch with the right media and ensure that the key messages are carried out while not making it look overtly 'advertorial in nature'. This influences the tone and intensity of how organizations communicate.

## Profession

Overall, the growth of business significantly broadens the reach of public relations to help organizations operate. The range of offerings – with its enormous scope and immense opportunities – now includes media relations, internal communications, marketing communications, financial communications, CSR, stakeholder engagement, events and sponsorship, public policy or advocacy, issues management and crisis communications.

A challenge facing the profession, however, are “abysmal” fees impacting the industry and the ability of firms to develop talent and generate quality work. As well, professionals see a gradual takeover of large Indian firms by Multi-National Agencies (MNC) as well as a diversification of larger players from providing core public relations services to also offering marketing communication services.

## Media

From a state controlled single-channel phenomenon, India now has close to 700 television channels across the country and an astounding number of newspapers and magazines. The addition of social media and new standard operating practices create a sea change for the profession. As one professional observes, “now the focus is more on immediacy than accuracy, the work more about getting information out and controlling spread of negatives within minutes than even hours”.

Everything is, according to professionals, influenced by the advertisement spend the client reserves. In recent election coverage, for example, professionals observe how the news coverage was shored up to reflect the glory of one party while ubiquitously running down the other. Many attribute this view to the differences in spending on advertising by the opposing sides. As one observes, “the news quotient has gone up akin to the cricket that is being played non-stop in the name of entertainment”. The emergence of Social and Digital media also transforms the way people perceive, interact and respond in the environment, which becomes challenging as its influence is dynamically felt round the clock.

So many ways to share information can create more chaos than sanctity. While this creates business opportunities for news business and journalists, the art of storytelling is witnessing a decline because of the “Business of News” as ownership patterns begin to haunt media houses

and stifle editorial policies. As a result, media is now more monetized than before in the consumer media space. Given the revenue pressures, paid publicity and paid journalism are becoming more common. Media preference is now dictated to some extent by the tabloidization of the story. As one observes, “every story needs to have some oomph quotient for consumption as a consumer. Plain news is now boring. The result is that more media houses are now adapting to this style of putting out a story”. The growing influence and strength of social and digital media, as well, directs the professional focus to peer advocacy, word of mouth and experience as three key attributes of a successful public relations campaign.

As a result, consumption of media in the form of news has witnessed a lot of change in preferences and volume. From a single State-run TV channel to 700 now – plethora of news channels has skewed consumption habits and regional language media are dominating the media debate. National English mainstream media is feeling the pinch with lowering advertising revenues due to shrinking circulation and readership figures. Some media houses have acquired smaller regional players in different markets to offer a large bouquet of media option to customers and clients.

## Consumers

Most consumers see media as a credible and powerful tool for social change. Media activism and citizen journalism continue to be the hope of many sections of the society where the voice of the common man is not otherwise heard. The people of the country are, by nature, phlegmatic with a disposition to adopt or ignore a message. Emotional messaging still strikes a chord with the audiences who, as one professional observes, “have, by nature, great respect for the institution of family.”

Another unique factor is that once consumers take a particular liking for a newspaper or channel it becomes a permanent fixture in their lives, “like an alter ego of sorts”. The growing youth segment – at ease with new media and its characteristics – spans not only the metros but also towns and villages covering a large populace reaching over 250 to 300 million. This is unique to India in potential and diversity. The availability of cable TV – with its deep penetration in rural towns – and affordable smart phones has made people look at media in a unique way depending on category and type of messaging. The public service messages that still dominate State TV and Radio have become less creative due to lower interest in the message rather than budget issues. Citizen journalism, in fact, is refining the media and messaging model in India. The next 10 years will witness lots of change.

The public relations profession, in addition to experiencing the proliferation and dynamic pace of the new media, must react to changes in consumer buying habits. Consumers have become more sensitive to how their purchases impact the world – with concern over greening and other issues of social responsibility – which encourages the profession to reach beyond public relations to simply make good business sense. This encourages the profession to make managing reputation such a corporate priority that its importance transcends marketing and public relations ethics. This reinforces the need for more professional rigor and competencies in public relations and reputation management.



## Social Media

Social media is now the biggest phenomenon in how India communicates. It is the main vehicle for communicating with Young India. Since feedback and opinion on the social media cannot be entirely controlled, it has led to a new awareness about accountability and openness whether or not the governments corporates. Thick and fast feedback – and retribution swift for any “wrongdoing” – can change the cultural context of communications and image building. This is, perhaps, the single most defining factor since the advent of television channels to change how people communicate. It means that every person who has an opinion can articulate this to his or her immediate circle that, in turn, may have a ripple effect.

Social media is, as well, the new fad among metros and Tier II towns, partly because of the advent of smart mobile phones and the ease of using the Internet. Twitter and Facebook posts become extensions of media houses as well as ways for reporters to prowl for gossip and stories as well as to develop stories and post updates. The new government has created a hub for Social Media in the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting for all department and government work. But, as one professional observes, “the transition to two-way on account of social media is very slow and still a monologue and far from becoming a meaningful platform for debate”. As well, because of its dynamic response and widespread reach, the media today has become an online round the clock forum, where preparedness, speedy response and anticipative public relations define success.

# Future for the Profession

## Trends

One key thing the public relations profession in India must learn is to move away from a high level of “media-centricity”. As the news space gets overrun by a surfeit of information emerging from a bustling business and policy environment, the consumer media move to a high degree of monetized information. With falling circulation figures, and the meteoric penetration of digital media, traditional forms of public relations will face decline. The profession will need to become more evocative and dynamic to reach target audiences. Traditional public relations methods may stop yielding results. New methods and a close grasp of using social media will become imperative for the profession to remain relevant. At the same time, increasing consumer and public expectations – driven by a growing awareness of their rights – will shine the spotlight on trust and credibility for all public relations professionals.

## Capabilities

The pace of change intensifies the demand for qualified and skilled talent. Professionals observe that the profession must interact with media, academia and industry and government regulatory agencies or face tough times ahead. As one describes, “the transition from peddling media releases to more strategic counsel and diversifying our bouquet of services” will create more demand for skilled professionals. Public relations will be the “go-to-job”. Areas where professionals must focus include digital communications, marketing and branding. According to another professional, “public relations professionals need to adapt to the evolutionary process or fall by the wayside. They need to align their thinking to include a creative perspective. The ability to soak up information and then studying avenues of influence before exercising the strategy will become even more important. The best preparation will be to practice the art of story telling a hundred times over before they pitch stories to the media”. Others agree, saying that professionals must be able to “articulate a thought in a comprehensive and concise manner while exercising brevity”.

This will result in professionals who are “more authentic, knowledgeable, stakeholder sensitive and responsive,” as well as “alive to” changing trends. Professionals also need better knowledge management, a 360 approach to brand and image solutions, and strategic (rather than tactical) understanding of business perspectives “tempered with insights on stakeholder psychology that influence perceptions, beliefs and opinions”. Professionals describe the necessary move to strategic counsel beyond tactical public relations and media relations.

They see a profession that builds reputation capital using a diverse tool kit that includes social responsibility and stakeholder engagement, content strategy, digital media, internal, financial and marketing communication and public policy with a wider view on role of public relations and the value it can bring to an organization.

# Resources for the Profession

## Professional Associations

Associations would do well to incubate skills and knowledge practices in public relations. They should encourage and facilitate global exchanges of skills, services and knowledge. The key is to play a role in educating and mentoring young professionals and help them learn the skills that the profession demands today. This may mean a bit of overhaul and working with key educational institutions to relook at their curricula to ensure the industry gets job-ready young graduates. The associations also need to provide platforms for individuals to assemble under a common aegis and create a forum to share knowledge and discuss case studies, strategies honed without fear of theft of intellectual property and the recognition of contributors who fill mentoring roles. It is important that profession use its wealth of experience to unearth new talent and guide professionals to become future pillars of the profession.

Of the approaches to sharing knowledge and sharing experiences, professionals suggest compulsory programs inter-linked with job prospects, as well as skill development and training on a regular basis. As one observes, “associations need to network with academia and accredit their programs to integrate learning and development with professionals. If professionals, academic institutions and clients – three key stakeholders – can get together to ensure that communications can play a large role in enhancing customer experience – the synergy will automatically create strong results that will benefit all”.

## Contact information

The Global Alliance is always interested in cooperating with local institutions and associations to provide profiles of the social, economic and media context of member countries, along with details on the local public relations industry, its main activities and tips on successful local practice.

For suggestions and discussion, please contact:

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