

A Descriptive Study on Entry-Level Indian PR Practitioners' Writing Skills with regards to evolving New Media Space

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ABSTRACT: The objective of this descriptive study was to determine the level of writing proficiency public relations practitioners are equipped with to meet the requirements put forward by the ever evolving new media space. The study has also attempted to identify the perceptions of academicians from leading communications institutes/colleges on the writing abilities of communications students and the changes made by them to adapt the writing skills required by the new media. This study, combining survey results of senior practitioners of India's largest public relations consultancy and academicians teaching communications across the country, confirms the significant dissatisfaction amongst the senior practitioners with the quality of writing amongst entry-level PR practitioners. Majority of educators who participated in the email based qualitative survey, reported that writing abilities in public relations students are of grave concern and that most students entering the programs lack basic writing abilities, leave aside their writing abilities for new media. Hence, all participants reported the need for new curriculum developments in response to new media as communication tools. The study is based on a qualitative email survey collected by 14 senior practitioners and equal number of academicians. The study also highlights the need for increased attention to technical training required to develop the writing skills for future PR practitioners, and creates an opportunity for an on-going study to track writing skills of entry-level PR practitioners in India over time.

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I. OBJECTIVE

The principal purpose of this descriptive study was to determine how Indian public relations practitioners, particularly those occupying senior management roles, assessed the quality of writing amongst the budding public relations practitioners. Another important purpose of this study was also identify whether entry-level public relations practitioners have equipped themselves with writing capabilities to meet the requirements of new-age media. To contribute to this discussion, this study examines the role of public relations curriculum and other factors as it relates to public relations practitioners at strategic management positions.

II. LIMITATIONS

The author surveyed only 14 senior public relations practitioners who are currently working with India's largest communications consultancy and only 14 academicians from various communications colleges and Institutes. The author only sent surveys to selected senior most members in management-level positions. Also, the author omitted colleges and universities that do not offer public relations programs. The author did not analyse college and university websites or course offerings, and only gathered information about course curriculums from a public relations professor from selected colleges and institutes.

Hypothesis

H1 – The majority of public relations practitioners at the management-level will express a high degree of concern with the writing abilities of entry-level practitioners.

H2 – The majority of public relations practitioners at the management-level require entry-level practitioners to have specialized writing skills in new media.

H3 – The majority of educators are aware of the dissatisfaction among practitioners with respect to entry-level practitioners' writing abilities.

H4 – The majority of colleges and universities offer a limited number of writing courses.

H5 – The majority of colleges and universities are beginning to adapt public relations curriculums to include writing courses focused on new media.

Assumptions

The author assumes that the senior practitioners and professors in public relations at the colleges or universities selected have provided accurate and truthful information concerning writing abilities of entry level practitioners and program curriculum.

III. INTRODUCTION

The Public Relations Society of America, defines public relations as a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics (PRSA 2009). Public relations is also a melting pot of industries and areas of study – journalism, political science, social media, public affairs and business – to name a few. As practitioners, our backgrounds are diverse and the paths that led us to public relations vary. No matter how each public relations practitioner gets into the profession, there is one skill we should all share: clear, crisp and exceptional writing. According to Ben Silverman, “You don’t have to be a novelist, but if you can’t write a decent letter, memo or, most importantly, press release, then you shouldn’t be a public relations practitioner, Ben Silverman, (January, 2011).

People can learn to pitch a story to the media, be more organized, measure, or use social media for business; however, if you can’t write, it’s nearly impossible to execute any of these tasks well. The creation of compelling content is a fundamental communications skill. Public relations practitioners are required to develop content that is accurate and compelling on behalf of companies and organizations. This takes many forms: press releases, pitching bloggers and reporters, e-newsletters, case studies, speeches, message development, blogging, tweeting, and so on.

Writing is an essential aspect of our industry, because it is the way we communicate with our key publics (Bailey, October 2012). Given the sheer number of the media formats and platforms today, strong writing skills are more useful than ever. Each one involves different approaches with respect to substance and tone, and this means content in public relations is more important than ever (Weisel, October, 2011).

One of the most common complaints from journalists is that public relations practitioners cannot communicate – verbal as well as written (Marisa Louw, October 2016). Nearly every editor and reporter complains that the writing quality of PR materials has deteriorated to a dangerous level with many releases lacking clarity, brevity and directness. News releases are often poorly written.

Over a period of time, public relations practice has really changed. The Internet has transformed not only how we communicate, but with whom, when and even where we communicate. We have 24/7 access to the world at large, creating exciting new opportunities and myriad potential pitfalls (Allen Mireles, February 2014). The days of writing news release after news release have given way to the cleverly-worded 140 character snippet (Dorothy Crenshaw, January 2015). The style of PR writing has also evolved. “PR writing” is no longer translated to “lame, boring, jargon-filled press release that no one cares about.” PR writing now means Infographics, tweets, blog posts, Facebook updates, Instagram one-liners, Vine clips, Pinterest boards (Change PR, March 2015).

There has been substantial study on the importance of writing for successful career (Austin & Ventura, 1985; Quible, 1991; Sides, 1992; Storms, 1983, p. 15.); Professional advancement (Faigley & Miller, 1982, p. 565; Storms, 1983, p.15), and improved employment opportunities (Faigley & Miller, 1982, p. 565). Studies also indicate that poor writing is widely considered a serious problem in the workplace (Faigley, et al., 1981, p. 31; Faigley & Miller, 1982, p. 564). However, few empirical studies have examined entry level public relations practitioners’ writing abilities. Further, there has been limited focus on the requisite competencies and skills required for contemporary public relations practitioners, despite the transformations in the media and professional communications fields in recent years. This study attempts to build awareness to fill in this gap.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA 2009), defines public relations as a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics. Public relations is one profession that assimilates various professional streams such as journalism, social media, marketing, political science, public affairs, business management etc., to name a few. Practitioners join this industry from various backgrounds and paths, however no matter how they embrace this practice, there is this one skill that every practicing public relations practitioner should be good at is exceptional writing abilities.

This is not an unknown fact but something public relations practitioners have themselves set greater emphasis on writing as the single most important change to take place in public relations education (Kalupa & Allen, 1982, p. 38-39). Public relations practitioner who is good at writing will have a clear advantage over those who are not well equipped. According to Sancar (2016), a practitioner who does not possess good writing skills will also fail to manage media relations as well as he will not be able to communicate effectively with the media and attract their attention to his written pitches.

As per the study conducted by Johnson (1993) found that, of the 18 skills that public relations practitioners sought in new employees, communication and writing skills were ranked as highest (p. 7). Similarly, in a study conducted by Wakefield and Cottone (1985), in which high-ranking public relations executives assessed the importance of 38 distinct knowledge and skill areas for PR practitioners, writing skills occupied three of the top five positions (p. 10). Wilcox and Cameron (2006), recommends that public relations practitioners should be equipped with five basic abilities, which are writing skills; research; planning expertise; problem-solving and business- economic competence. Which is also confirmed by Cole, et al., (2009), who states that writing acquires the top of the list of five essential skills needed in public relations. Hardin and Pompper (2004) have further summarised that new public relations hires must be excellent writers to be marketable in the industry. Yet poor writing has been cited as the biggest weakness of people entering the field as reaffirmed by senior public relations practitioners (Baxter, 1986, p.9). An alarming number of communication practitioners report that entry-level employees possess poor writing skills and even poorer editing skills (Hines and Basso, 2008).

In 2008, Cole et. al., conducted a descriptive study to gauge the perceptions of the PR supervisors from across the US on the writing-skills of entry level public relations practitioners. They had surveyed over 800 members of PRSA and found significant documentation that entry-level practitioners have trouble writing — from press releases, to memos, to emails. The comprehensive descriptive study listed several discontent amongst seasoned PR practitioners with entry-level PR writing in America and concluded that almost half of the senior-level public relations practitioners have admitted that they have lowered their expectations regarding entry-level practitioners' writing abilities (Cole, et al., 2009). Also a study done by Berry, et. al., (2011) pointed out that, while employers feel that writing is an essential skill in public relations practitioners, few are happy with the writing of entry-level PR practitioners. Given the diversity and complexity of public relations writing, Philip Lesly (1975), recommends that every communication team should have at least one master of the English language, who would write major materials, screen and edit the work of colleagues, and critique the organization's communication ideas and expression of them.

In an effort to determine the strengths of entry-level practitioners writing abilities, Cole et. al., (2009) asked supervisors to rate skill levels of entry-level practitioners in four different categories: proper grammar, correct spelling/punctuation, ability to organize ideas, and the use of Associated Press (AP) or other style guidelines. Out of a possible 5-point scale, supervisors rated entry-level practitioners highest in correct spelling/punctuation, but only gave them an average score of 2.01. However when the same questionnaire were given to the entry-level practitioners to rate themselves, they rated themselves higher than what their supervisors had ranked them. The most significant concern the researchers' addressed was the degree to which senior practitioners expressed their frustration with the declining writing skills among entry-level practitioners.

In an another study conducted in 2008 by Joseph Basso and Randy Hines, both college professors of public relations and communication examined issues concerning writing competency in communication students. The researchers surveyed senior-level communication practitioners on entry-level practitioners' fundamental knowledge and abilities in grammar, punctuation and sentence structure. Overall, the researchers found that a significant number of communication practitioners reported low scores in rating entry-level employees. Their study indicated that the senior-level practitioners' perception of higher education is that colleges and universities inadequately prepare their students for careers that require a substantial amount of writing. Even today, the dissatisfaction with entry-level public relations practitioners' writing abilities continues to be frequently reported, and is a major concern for both senior practitioners in the industry as well as educators. This obviously means that training students to write effectively needs to be one of the highest priorities of institutions of communications and public relations programs. Given the diversity of writing assignment public relations practitioners have to do on a day to day basis, their competence in writing needs to improve (Pearson, 1987). According to Harrison (1989), public relations students must be competent in news writing, speech writing, financial writing, copywriting, and promotional writing (pp. 42-43). A survey conducted by Detweiler (1980) provides further evidence of the diversity of writing styles required of PR practitioners. According to Detweiler (1980): Practitioners cannot concentrate in one writing framework as their counterparts in journalism, broadcasting and advertising. They require a background in editing, graphics, planning, campaigning, special events, public opinion and evaluation that far transcends the complexity of communication skills required by the newsperson. Such diversity poses serious challenges for the design of a public relations writing curriculum that effectively prepares students for writing in the workplace. It is particularly important that the curriculum accurately reflects the prominence in the workplace of various writing types. Such curriculum decisions cannot rest purely on the professional experience of individual faculty members, given the possibility that their experience is atypical. Faculty members may only be familiar with the writing activities of practitioners with a substantial number of years of public relations experience. The writing activities of lower level practitioners may differ significantly. In addition, the ever-changing nature of the public relations field requires that writing curriculum decisions to be based on direct contact with active practitioners.

Todd (2009) suggested that educators work closely with industry practitioners to develop writing assignments and assessment measures that will help students learn how to write clear messages targeted toward publics using current technology. Public relations writing curricula must accurately reflect the writing responsibilities of public relations practitioners (Napoli et. al., 1997). Regular evaluation of skills is necessary to develop writing curricula that reflects the demands of the industry (Kurt Wise, 2005).

New media has significantly impacted the practice of public relations by changing the communication landscape. The use of new media enables organizations to empower a wide variety of strategic publics to communicate with them. Organizations can strategically communicate with employees, customers, stockholders, communities, governments, and other stakeholders (Wright and Hinson, 2010). As the use of new media continues to develop, and proves to be an effective communication tool in the practice of public relations, industry demand for skilled writers will continue to grow.

The emergence of new media has changed the way organizations communicate to internal and external audiences. Communication has become more instantaneous and, in effect, causes the medium to require a different approach (Wright & Hinson, 2008).

The implications for public relations practitioners of needing to prepare material faster than ever before include being able to produce what is required almost instantaneously and with the required level of accuracy; having processes in place that can get required priority clearances for materials to be released; and, having the technology at hand to directly distribute or upload what is being disseminated. These factors may put pressure on the public relations practitioner and the team with which they work but may also pressure the relationships they have with colleagues or more senior staff. Writing for cross-media delivery will continue as a major component of practice but the demand for multimedia elements will bring even more challenges in this area.

V. METHODOLOGY

The researcher conducted a descriptive study combining qualitative survey of 14 senior PR practitioners and 14 senior academicians to evaluate the current competency level of entry-level public relations practitioners' writing abilities. The senior practitioners were employees of India's largest public relations consultancy and academicians were from various communications institutions across the country.

In this study, we included questions to examine skill components of PR practitioners. We also sought to determine whether senior practitioners perceive a decline or an improvement in the preparation of entry-level practitioners over time, and whether PR writing tasks are increasing in variety and complexity. The researcher asked respondents to indicate specific deficiencies in writing abilities and to provide information concerning writing for new media. The researcher also conducted qualitative email based interviews with professors in various communications institutions offering public relations programs to determine if the program curriculums foster development of writing skills currently demanded in the profession.

Method of Analysing Data

The researcher codified the Web-based surveys then used the qualitative data to identify current perceptions of writing abilities of entry-level practitioners as well as identify if practitioners demand entry-level practitioners to have writing skillsets that are specific to new media. The researcher codified the responses of professors, then used the qualitative data to identify the institutions' position concerning the writing abilities of students and the inclusion of changing industry demands, specifically new media as a communications tool into their curriculums.

VI. FINDINGS

Qualitative survey with the focused group of senior public relations practitioner and academicians

The researcher through an email based survey interviewed 14 senior practitioner working with India's largest public relations consultancy. Following are the findings of the qualitative survey:

1. Most important skills for public relations practitioners?

Here the participants were asked to identify most important public relations skills, entry level practitioners need to excel in their chosen field. A few common skills noted were ability to understand the client business, the art of analysis, a storyteller through content, creative thinking and understanding the media better.

2. How would you assess the overall writing abilities of entry level practitioners in your division?

Here the participants were asked to rate the overall writing abilities of entry level practitioner, who report in to them. The general response to this query has been quite dissatisfactory. Participant find that the writing abilities of entry level practitioners is bad and not up to the mark. While the job requires a lot of writing assignments, the entry level professionals have lot to learn in this area.

3. How would you assess the factual/business writing abilities of entry level practitioners?

Here the participants were asked to assess factual/business writing abilities of entry level practitioners. The participants feel that since the basics, i.e. the writing ability of the practitioners are only poor the content is bound to have factual errors. While a few participants point that at the academic level, a lot of emphasis should be given to business reading, practice of research & analysis and writing skills. A few of them have mentioned that they personally check through the content including internal/external emails of entry level practitioners.

4. How would you assess the persuasive writing abilities of entry level practitioners?

Here the participants were asked how they would assess entry-level practitioner's persuasive writing abilities. The participants have some varied ways to assess the persuasive writing abilities of entry level practitioners for instance, giving them assignments to write articles, pitch notes, press releases etc. Some feel that it is not the job of entry level practitioners while the others say that this skill is pathetic at entry level.

5. Does writing for the web require different skills? If so, how?

In this question, participants were asked if writing for web would require a different level of skillset. Most participants agree that the web requires different kind of writing skills. The content has to be SEO friendly, restricted word count as required by the platform, catchy and crisp as well as to the point.

6. What sets a good PR writer apart from an average or poor writer?

Some of the things pointed out were, spelling errors, wrong grammar, targeted towards the right audience, command over language and many more...

7. Would you say agencies have different writing needs than other types of organizations? If so, how are the needs different?

There was a mix of opinion by the participants, a few feel that writing for agencies requires different skill sets, while the others felt that it's the same. Participants have pointed that writing on behalf of the client requires a lot of understanding of the client business and current trends. The others say that if the target audience is same the message that reaches them will ultimately be same also a good writer is capable of adapting to any style of writing.

8. How would you assess the usefulness of existing courses in PR writing that you may be aware of? Please give specific examples.

9. If you could design a PR writing course that would equip entry level practitioners with the skills needed for successful agency work, list the 10 topics you will include?

Participants have accounted number of topics that could be included in a PR writing course. The list includes grammar, spelling, punctuations, focused communications, web writing, business management, press release, pitch notes and many more.

10. Do you think it is necessary for a PR person to be a good writer in order to build a successful career? Please explain your reasons.

Surprisingly many participants do not think writing is the most important capability for public relations practitioner as they believe there are other elements that can be brought to the fore and if required a content writer should be hired. Many also agreed that writing skills are important as a good writer gets right most of the messages or content is all written communications, be it emails, press releases, media invites, authored articles, media inputs, company and spokesperson profiles, chairman speeches etc.

Qualitative survey with the focused group of academicians

7 Academicians teaching public relations at various leading mass communications and public relations institutes in India were surveyed to understand their perception of English language proficiency and writing skills amongst students joining public relations programs and also to understand what changes they are making in their programs to meet the needs of evolving new media. Following are the findings

1. Do you think it is necessary for a PR person to be a good writer in order to build a successful career?

Most of the academicians agree that a public relations practitioner must be a good writer as one of the important jobs is to communicate to masses through various traditional and social platforms. There was only exception to this thought and said that it is the other skills that matter more over writing skills

2. What are the most important skills for a PR Person?

While writing and communication skills has topped the list other skills like analysis, creative and interpersonal skills have also made it to the list.

3. How would you assess the overall writing abilities of students pursuing PR programs in your institution? Identify areas of deficiency and steps taken by you to address limitations that faculty face in developing addressing these writing issues

The academicians have listed various ways in which they assess the writing abilities of students like checking their sentences, grammar, English, evaluate the message through the content. The pieces written by the students can give an understanding how much of in-depth knowledge the student possesses.

4. How would you assess the factual/business writing abilities of PR students?

The academicians are not quite satisfied with the knowledge the students possess about the current trends. Giving them assignments or test can help assess their abilities.

5. How would you assess the persuasive writing abilities of your PR students?

Academicians rate the persuasive writing skills as Satisfactory. They assess the students based on the conversations, how the situations is evaluated or demonstrated and through assignments.

6. Does writing for the new media require different skills? If so then does your programs have adapted to include courses on new media? How the program's curriculum has been changed?

All of them agree that new media requires different style of writing. Some set of rules are applicable for online/web writing and they have to be followed if one needs to get a good response for the article. Print can be quite a leisure reading and hence can be an elaborate writing while online needs to be short, clear to the point to catch the attention of the reader.

7. What sets a good PR writer apart from an average or poor writer?

According to the academicians simple and effective writing can be terms as good writing, hence a good writer is able to convey a message through the most simple words that can be understood by the readers.

8. Would you say to work in a PR agency or in a corporate entity as a PR professional, students would need different writing needs than other types of organisations? If so, how are the needs different?

The academicians believe that a good writer can adapt to any style of writing depending on the target audience. Public relations communications require writing press release, company statements or drafting profiles etc, however it all has to be researched well for facts before being shared.

9. How would you assess the usefulness of existing courses in PR writing that you may be aware of?

The academicians do not note any kind of specialized courses for PR writing. They are combined in the regular course curriculum and taught alongside other syllabus.

10. If you could design a PR writing course that would equip entry level practitioners with the skills needed for successful agency work, list the 10 topics you will include?

Different styles of writing tops the list of academician. Writing for traditional or new media, presentations, plans, strategies along with authored articles, company statements, speeches are a few preferences of the academicians.

VII. CONCLUSION& RECOMMENDATIONS

Senior practitioners have long lamented on the writing skills of the young people seeking their first job (Wise, 2005). Even two decade ago, The Report on the Commission of Public Relations Education (1999) listed 'informative and persuasive writing' as one of the core skills necessary to enter the field. Writing in PR is not a literary or academic skill, but one that encompasses journalistic and marketing skills. It is primarily technical and functional and can be taught as a craft. Writing, whether focused on the client or the consumer, is all about packaging up a message and communicating it effectively so that it plays a role in influencing or changing attitudes, perceptions or behaviours.

Public Relations industry in India has become more organized and specialized and therefore requires practitioners who can adapt these specialized skills and effectively write to communicate the required messages. Currently, both educators and practitioners opine that writing capabilities of the entry-level practitioners is going from bad to worse especially with emergence of mobile phones and social that is further deteriorating it.

This descriptive study reaffirms the negative impressions of senior public relations practitioners about the writing competency of entry-level peers. The public relations industry as well as the academic institutions should take note of this growing concern and draw a roadmap for filling in this gap.

The study does not reveal or explore the root cause of this negative impression of a significant majority of seasoned PR practitioners. One of the speculation surrounds the notion that as a greater number of the seasoned practitioners in the PR business are, in fact, former journalists, new graduates from broad-based PR programs are simply not capable of meeting the expected professional journalist standards, and perhaps should not be expected to. These are issues that call for further research. Another notion that requires further study, suggests that the current generation of entry-level PR practitioners have been raised in an environment in which mobile phones, television and video games have been substituted for reading. Then there are grammar and spell-checking software that are replacing seminal works like Strunk and White (1979). The opportunity for more research abounds.

There is an increased complexity in writing activities required from entry-level practitioners. However, there is a huge expectation mismatch between the junior writers and their supervisors. Infact, the seniors suggest that it is better to reduce the expectations with regard to writing capabilities rather than remediating about it. Writing competency is a huge challenge faced by the PR industry and will need a closer examination than only a descriptive study as ours can provide.

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