

2026: TIME FOR A NEW DEFINITION OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

A new definition of public relations (PR) is needed to reflect the modern operating environment and illustrate how integral the discipline is to individual and organisational success. In short, the industry needs better PR for PR.

The PRCA is therefore asking for the perspectives of industry leaders within its member community to agree a new definition for adoption.

The following draws upon recent academic literature and a thematic analysis of comments and posts following the Radio 4 “PR is dead” debate featuring PRCA CEO Sarah Waddington CBE.

It is designed to support wider understanding and focus on business outcomes to underline PR’s commercial strengths.

Suggested PRCA definition:

Public relations is the strategic management discipline which enhances reputation, improves brand value, builds culture and enables organisations and individuals to build and maintain legitimacy with stakeholders.

Public relations earns the trust on which organisational and personal performance and lifetime customer and shareholder value depend.

Through board advisory related to futures and foresights work, data and insights, stakeholder mapping and engagement, public affairs, risk preparedness, crisis management and more, the function's value lies in supporting leaders to reduce uncertainty, interpret complexity and manage volatility.

It delivers credible two-way engagement that shapes perception, informs decision-making, supports behaviour change, builds commercial revenues and creates societal and economic impact. Fundamentally, it is concerned with the health of an organisation or individual's relationships across all the constituencies that determine their ability to operate, grow and thrive.

The definition is based on the following core principles:

- ***Relationship-centred, not output-focused***

The practice is fundamentally about cultivating meaningful relationships rather than producing discrete deliverables. Press releases, media coverage, and content are means to an end - not the end itself. Success is measured by the strength, durability,

and mutual benefit of stakeholder relationships delivering tangible commercial, economic and societal impact.

- **Earned credibility as the primary currency**

In an environment where attention can be purchased but trust cannot, contemporary public relations prioritises earning credibility through third-party endorsement, editorial scrutiny, authentic engagement, and consistent behaviour. The discipline recognises that audiences process paid messages through a filter of scepticism, making earned trust the most valuable and defensible asset an organisation can possess. It counters misinformation and ensures content is factchecked, balanced and fair.

- **Strategic counsel at the highest level**

Modern public relations operates as a strategic function that informs individual and organisational decision-making at the board and executive level. Practitioners serve as reputation custodians who help leaders determine not only what to say and how to say it, but whether to speak at all - and who anticipate consequences across all stakeholder groups before actions are taken.

- **Two-way engagement, not one-way broadcasting**

Effective practice balances storytelling with listening. It involves deep engagement, consultation, and the development of emergent strategy through genuine collaboration with stakeholders. Audiences are recognised as active participants with agency and voice, not passive recipients of messaging.

- **Multi-stakeholder orientation**

The discipline extends far beyond consumer marketing to encompass the full ecosystem of relationships essential for individual and organisational success: employee engagement, investor relations, community relations, government affairs, regulatory engagement, and broader societal licence to operate. It addresses the priorities of the entire leadership team - not merely the marketing function.

- **Navigating complexity and managing risk**

Contemporary practice equips individuals and organisations to operate in an environment characterised by geopolitical uncertainty, political polarisation, technological disruption, and the rapid spread of misinformation. It encompasses crisis preparedness, issues management, scenario planning, and the capacity to respond with agility when reputational threats emerge.

- **Platform-agnostic storytelling**

While rooted in traditional earned media, modern public relations creates and distributes credible content across owned, shared, and earned channels - including websites, podcasts, social platforms, creator partnerships, and direct community

engagement. The discipline adapts storytelling to context while maintaining narrative coherence and authenticity.

- **Shaping the information ecosystem**

As artificial intelligence increasingly mediates how information is discovered and consumed, public relations plays a critical role in ensuring individuals and organisations are represented accurately and authoritatively in AI-generated outputs. This requires building a robust, trustworthy presence that algorithms recognise, cite, and recommend.

- **Long-term value over short-term noise**

The practice rejects the notion that success comes from "flooding the internet with content." Instead, it prioritises strategic, high-quality engagement that builds cumulative reputational equity over time. One credible, well-placed message delivered to the right audience at the right moment outweighs a volume of forgettable content.

- **Grounded in insight and evidence**

Contemporary practice is informed by data, research, and continuous environmental scanning. It employs stakeholder mapping, sentiment analysis, media monitoring, and performance measurement to guide strategy, demonstrate value, and refine approaches based on evidence rather than intuition alone.