

A New PRCA Definition of Public Relations

Introduction

In January 2026, the PRCA undertook a member consultation to develop a new definition of public relations for adoption by its community - one that reflects the modern operating environment and articulates the discipline's strategic value to organisational and individual success.

This work was prompted by a recognition that existing definitions often fail to capture the breadth and depth of contemporary practice. Too frequently, public relations is understood through an outdated lens: as media relations or channels, or publicity and spin. The reality is that practitioners today operate as strategic advisors, helping leaders navigate complexity, manage risk, build stakeholder relationships and earn the trust on which long-term performance depends.

A draft definition and accompanying principles were circulated to PRCA industry leaders, inviting their perspectives on the proposed framing. This document summarises the feedback received and publishes the final results.

The responses were constructive and thoughtful. While there was broad support for both the initiative and direction of the draft, respondents raised important questions - about the definition's length and accessibility, about the explicit inclusion of ethical responsibilities and about whether the definition might in time be developed in partnership with the wider profession.

We publish this review in a spirit of transparency and continued dialogue. We hope this summary contributes to ongoing conversation within our membership and welcome further perspectives as our work continues.

Feedback on the PRCA's Definition of Public Relations

Areas of Agreement

- Support for the initiative itself

All respondents endorsed the need for a new definition. There was unequivocal support from several agency leaders for both the process and the definition as drafted. Even the more critical responses acknowledged the effort and validity of updating the definition.

- Recognition of contemporary principles

The core principles were seen as reflecting a broader and more contemporary understanding of public relations practice that moves beyond a narrow focus on publicity. The emphasis on two-way engagement, earned credibility and strategic counsel resonated broadly.

- The strategic positioning

No one disputed the framing of public relations as having the potential to operate as a strategic management discipline at board level. The shift away from public relations as publicity towards public relations as counsel was completely accepted and indeed celebrated.

Areas of Contention

- Length and accessibility emerged as the most consistent criticism
Multiple respondents argued for brevity, calling for a concise paragraph that could convey a memorable message to those outside the profession. There was agreement that the opening sentence should stand alone without requiring elaboration.
- The ethics gap
Some respondents independently flagged the absence of explicit ethical framing. One argued that given the emphasis on trust, the definition should acknowledge the practitioner's role in challenging leadership where necessary, not simply supporting it. One pushed further, noting public relations' role in shaping whose voices are heard and calling for acknowledgment of marginalised communities, non-human stakeholders such as the environment and future generations. This feedback is now built into the longer definition and / or principles underpinning the definition.
- "Earns" versus "builds" trust
It was suggested the language around trust implied the profession takes credit - and therefore blame - for everything an organisation does. The alternative framing of "building" rather than "earning" trust would position public relations as a contributor rather than sole owner of organisational reputation.
- Reactive framing
One respondent cautioned against the definition appearing as a response to recent media criticism, arguing it should stand on its own merits rather than being shaped by external provocations.

External Feedback

- Future engagement with the wider profession
Some industry voices suggested that once the PRCA membership has agreed a definition, there may be value in engaging the wider public relations industry to explore whether a shared definition might be developed collaboratively.

This exercise has been carried out to ensure PRCA members have a definition they feel reflects modern practice. That said, the wider profession is of course welcome to also adopt this with appropriate attribution. The PRCA welcomes participation from other relevant bodies in any future conversations.

Revised Definition

Core definition (designed to stand alone):

Public relations is the strategic management discipline that builds trust, enhances reputation and helps leaders interpret complexity and manage volatility - delivering measurable outcomes including stakeholder confidence, long-term value creation and commercial growth.

Extended definition:

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

Grounded in ethical practice, public relations builds 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.

PR delivers credible two-way engagement that shapes perception, informs decision-making, supports behaviour change, builds commercial revenues and creates societal and economic impact. At its core, it works with organisations and individuals to create strong and healthy relationships with the people and groups affecting their ability to function, grow and succeed.

Principles Underpinning the PRCA's New Definition

PRCA definition 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 consistent behaviour, authentic behaviour, third-party endorsement and editorial scrutiny. 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. Through ethical advice that can be trusted and constructive challenge, 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. Wider interests are factored into thinking, such as the environment, marginalised groups, future generations and more.

- 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, internal communication, 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 enhanced by data, research and continuous environmental scanning. Underpinned by good data literacy, 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.