

# Six R's of Public Relations Research

By Kirk Hallahan, APR, Fellow

Professional public relations puts a premium on the importance of research. PRSA's accreditation program, for example, emphasizes the importance of using formative research to develop programs and evaluative research to assess program effectiveness. Along the way, practitioners also use progressive research to avoid costly mistakes as campaigns are rolled out.

Research plays a pivotal role in the PR process. Yet many practitioners consider research an arcane — if not pedantic — topic. Here are six ideas about the practical, everyday use of research.

## Good Research is Routine

To be most effective, research needs to be a part of the regimens of both practitioners and clients. Research is a core competency for today's practitioner. Clients increasingly expect that practitioners' recommendations be solidly grounded upon more than opinion. Unfortunately, practitioners still confront some clients who hesitate to allocate budget to research. Educating some clients about the return-on-investment of research remains a key challenge facing the practice today.

## Good Research is Rigorous

To be valuable, research needs to be systematic and thorough. Rigor entails planning research activities thoughtfully in advance and then carrying out the research scheme so that all-important questions are addressed adequately. Rigor includes follow-through so that sufficient input is obtained — whether doing a Web search, a content analysis, focus groups or surveys. Findings also need to be carefully analyzed and reports produced so that the information can be shared.

## Good Research is Realistic

Although rigor is important to assure validity, practitioners must be practical. PR's two great taskmasters — time and money — often limit opportunities to conduct research. Yet these shouldn't be excuses. Being realistic involves maximizing available resources to validate assumptions or facts, explore alternative solutions, enhance efficiency, improve message effectiveness or measure the impact of a program. The purpose of research is simple: to improve the probability of correct decisions and recommendations. The sufficiency principle suggests that once a practitioner or client is confident about his or her understanding of a situation, further research might not be necessary. Of course, the dilemma is knowing what's enough.



Six R's (cont'd on page 5)

## Coaching (cont'd from page 2)

- Make the most of your two-page written summary. Thoroughly address each of the four required categories that comprise your entry: research, planning, execution and evaluation. Put on your writer's hat to make your entry shine.

- Make sure you include measurable objectives and describe how your tactics contribute to realizing them. The success of a campaign is largely defined by the extent to which outcomes meet or exceed specified measurement criteria. In the evaluation section of your entry, be sure the campaign's results are tied back to your stated objectives.

- Keep your entry short and sweet. Supporting materials are an important part of your entry, but don't presume that entries containing the most clips win Gold Picks. Include only key documents that demonstrate the results of your efforts. Also, judges are required to view only 10 minutes of video submissions. Cue the tape to what you'd like the judges to see, keeping in mind the 10-minute rule.

- Proofread, run spell-check, double-check. Please don't undermine the time and hard work you spend preparing your entry by forgetting to check your work.

- Use common sense. By telling the story of your award-winning work in a concise yet descriptive fashion, by highlighting measurable results that demonstrate your campaign's success, and by thinking like a judge when preparing your entry, you will have the best shot at bringing home the gold.

## Good Research is Reliable

Research strives to capture an accurate representation of what's happening in the real world. Regrettably, it's not a perfect process — and most research measures are subject to error. What we discover does not exactly match reality. Good research strives to overcome problems of incomplete, inaccurate or biased information. Each time we delve into a problem, we should come up with the same answer. Similarly, others should arrive at similar conclusions. Reliability is a function of being incisive, objective and rigorous.

## Good Research Asks the Right Questions

Before any formal research program is launched — particularly focus groups or surveys — careful thought must be given to what the problem is about and what information is needed. Focusing on the right questions provides a direction for research, improves efficiency and enhances productivity. Asking the right questions also involves asking the tough questions — about topics clients might not want to know about. While structure is important, practitioners must also be attune to ideas and issues not recognizes originally and to incorporate these in their findings.

## Good Research Seeks Reasons Why

Much research is descriptive. However, merely understanding what's occurring is probably not sufficient. Instead, understanding why people think, feel and act the way they do is critical. Such understanding of these underlying reasons provides the basis for taking action — whether making recommendations for changes in a client's policies or practices or developing a communication strategy. We must understand what's happening, but, more importantly, why.

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## AP STYLE

### Don't Forget Mom

In honor of Mother's Day here are a few mother-related words...AP Style:

- Mother's Day — the second Sunday in May. This year it's May 11.
- Mother Nature
- mother-in-law or mothers-in-law
- grandmother



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