

Public Relations professionals help a business or individual cultivate a positive reputation with the public through various unpaid or earned communications, including traditional media, social media, and in-person engagements. They also help clients defend their reputation during a crisis that threatens their credibility.

There's an old saying: "Advertising is what you pay for; publicity is what you pray for." Public relations isn't an easy profession to define. In fact, in 2012, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) accepted a few thousand submissions before finally agreeing on a definition:

"Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics."

After reading PRSA's definition, you might still have questions about PR: how can an organization take its beneficial relationship to the public and turn it into good press? Are you really "praying" for something, like the old saying goes, if you're using a strategic process to get results?

Hang with me – let's break it down.

The positive, storytelling side of PR
A PR professional works with an organization, company, government, or individual to cultivate a story that portrays that client's reputation, idea, product, position, or accomplishment in a positive light. So, in a sense, you can think of PR professionals as storytellers. Unlike advertisers, who tell stories through paid methods, PR professionals tell their stories through unpaid or earned media.

These unpaid or earned avenues include traditional media, social media, or speaking engagements – which are especially effective opportunities for reaching the general public. Keep in mind that a PR professional isn't just trying to reach a paying customer ... she's trying to reach everyone.

Hopefully, this is a digestible definition of PR. If you're still unsure of how PR looks in the real world, let's explore some examples.

Let's say you work for a small interior design company, and your business just won an award: "Best Interior Design Company in Chicago." A PR specialist might ask a reporter to write a story about this accomplishment to spread the news to the public.

Along with building a credible reputation for your interior design business, the PR professional is also helping the public receive relevant information about this accolade. If I'm a consumer looking for an interior designer, this announcement could help me, too.

Public relations extends to government, too. PR professionals can execute political campaigns or explain a government's new policy to the public. In this case, you can see how PR professionals work to maintain a healthy and productive relationship between their client (the government), and the general public, who have a right to hear about new policies.

The negative, damage-control side of PR isn't just used for positive storytelling. It's also used to mitigate any damage that could weaken a client's reputation.

In the early 1980s, numerous bottles of Johnson & Johnson's Tylenol product were laced with cyanide by an unknown person, killing seven people. This led to widespread panic and could have resulted in the end of Tylenol products.

Johnson & Johnson took aggressive PR measures to mitigate the damage: first, the company pulled all of its Tylenol products off the shelves and issued a national statement warning consumers not to purchase or use Tylenol. Then, Johnson & Johnson created a new tamper-resistant seal, and instructed 2,000 sales personnel to deliver presentations to the medical community to reintroduce these new, safer Tylenol bottles.

This effective PR strategy saved Johnson & Johnson's reputation, as well as their product – in fact, Tylenol shares climbed back up to 24 percent just six weeks after the cyanide crisis.

In the case of Johnson & Johnson, a simple advertising campaign wouldn't have worked. Instead, PR was necessary: PR professionals were able to spread a story that portrayed Johnson & Johnson as a company that puts consumers ahead of profit. Along with mitigating damage to Johnson & Johnson's reputation, PR was used to save more people from consuming cyanide-laced Tylenol, and then used to inform the public that Tylenol was safe again. A win-win-win.

In these examples, you can see PR professionals are adept at handling a wide variety of both good and bad circumstances, and must address these events so the public and client can maintain a beneficial relationship. PR specialists also play a role in advising management on the best policy decisions or actions to take, and conducting programs, such as fundraising or networking events, to help the public understand the organization's goals.

PR isn't just used to influence a story after it happens – it's also used to write that story in the first place.

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