
6 Focus groups and interviews

A big issue is when you try to find out what PR is. They don't tell you much. Maybe if they tell you more at the start it might correct the problem of so few guys doing it. Then again, it might work the other way. But I wouldn't have been able to say what it was when I started. But then, I can't tell you what it is after two years (male student).

The aim of interviewing the industry (professionals and students) was to gain “rich” information that might not be apparent from the surveys. Statistics can only tell so much, and do not give a clear indication of the insights into what people think of the industry, and even as to why people choose PR as a career.

6.1 Student focus groups

6.1.1 *Focus group 1, ECU*

The first student focus group was held at Edith Cowan University in a lecture theatre, from 7.45pm to 8.30pm. It consisted of 10 fourth-year PR students (eight female and two male) and was observed by tutor, Mr Vince Hughes, MBA. There was a mix of students, with two from Norway (1M, 1F), one from India (M), two from China (F) and one (F) from Hong Kong. For responses, students are identified by number (from left to right, and by gender (M or F). The format was to put forward results of earlier surveys and to ask students to respond to the results. All students were informed their identities would remain anonymous and that participation was voluntary. The main points to emerge from the focus groups:

6.1.2 *Student interviews*

I was the only male in my tute of 25 this semester. In lectures it's dominated “majorly” by females. You look around and you might see 10 guys among 50 or 60 females. So I did think at some stage why there were so many females (male student, 2005).

The interviews with students were, as it turns out, the key to the process. Professionals, in the main, could not provide reasons why the phenomenon was occurring. The key had to be with students; particularly the males. This sub-group is where the trend is apparent. The old days of entry to PR via journalism (previously a male-dominated profession) have long and truly passed.

From the transcripts of the interviews, a common theme among males was that PR was seen as “ambiguous”, “fuzzy” and generally lacked direction. (This feedback prompted the question in the second student survey about PR being “fuzzy in it logic”). One male student I interviewed was so disillusioned with PR, after two years, that he decided to switch to advertising in 2006. The following comment from a male student was typical.

To be honest, one of the things that has turned me off PR is that it seems ambiguous compared to marketing and advertising. It's hard to measure PR, and you don't know if the work you are doing is working or not. If you're doing marketing and advertising you have a better gauge. Sometimes you feel as though you've been studying for two years and don't know if you've done anything. I think this is one of the big issues we come across. Everyone likes to measure things at the end of the day to see how they're going. Males like that sense of competition and they try to beat other individuals, so they like to be measured. That's where it's frustrating because PR is hard to measure. We have sat down and talked about it. And it just seems you never know where you're at with it.

And another comment from a male student:

The internship proved to me what I had started to think about the industry. I'd say that it's true that the industry isn't very black and white. When I was doing my internship, I'd be there and ask them: 'exactly what do you do? What's involved?' They were connecting A to B, jumping up in the air and saying they were brilliant. It's very grey. And that's why I'm switching to advertising/marketing, because PR is not very definite. You don't exactly know what your role is. I think that anyone that hasn't done PR would see it a female-dominated industry. And that's a turn-off for guys, I think. I think one of the main skill to have in PR is to be able to be able to say something without saying anything, and I think women are pretty good at that. That does make it [PR] fuzzy. I think that's a motherly instinct (every woman has a chance to be a mother) and it's ingrained in females. Of course guys can have that ability, but it's more apparent in females.

Some of the female subjects (as the following comment illustrates) were aware of the different ways men and women thought about PR and its place in the business world.

The males did have a different approach. They tended to come from a marketing or political perspective. I always feel that men do marketing and women do PR for some reason. It is just my perception. Generally, men that do PR often give it a title so it doesn't look like they're doing PR. I've always thought of it as a profession that women do, like nursing. I wouldn't think of women becoming marketers. I don't think they do it consciously. It's just that they have this ideas that there are certain roles men do, and some that women do. It's like when they enroll, at uni someone says: 'what are you doing?' And they get the reply that 'oh, that's for girls.'

With PR not seen by students not be a particularly serious business subject, it is perhaps is an area in which ambitions do not play an important role. If we follow the reasoning of Moir and Jessel (1996), in that "ambition simply means different things to the different sexes", then PR probably suits women, more than men.

6.2 Professionals' focus group and interviews

6.2.1 Focus group – professionals

Due to the relatively low numbers in the focus group, and the short time frame, there were fewer topics mentioned (15), compared to the interviews (26 topics). There was a marked difference in the main topics being raised. The main differences were:

- Only one person in the focus group raised the issue of looking at the educational system, whereas 10 mentions were made of this in the interviews.
- The focus group did not broach the subject of imbalance. The interviews raised this topic 11 times.
- Other issues not raised by the focus group, but mentioned (times in bracket) in interviews were: female skills (6), abstract nature of PR (4), comparison to HR (3), creativity (3), and gender differences (2).
- Interviews did not raise the issue of PR being glamorous, or of women being better at multi-skilling.

Overall, the most mentioned topics were: perception of PR (14), influence of education (university) on PR, general imbalance (11), image of PR (8), women as better communicators, female skills, compassion (6), women [general], family issues, abstract nature of PR (5). There were another 11 topics, rating four mentions and below). These topics are simply based on the number of times they were mentioned. The statistics may vary somewhat in some categories. For example, if the topic of image is taken to be part of people's perception of PR, then the area of perception would increase markedly to 22 points.

The most-mentioned topics in the professionals' interviews were: imbalance/balance (11), university (10), perception of PR (8), "soft" nature of PR, (6), female skills 6, abstract nature of PR (4), comparison with human

resources (4). There were another 19 concepts/themes raised, ranging from three to one mentions.

The most-mentioned topics in the focus group were: perception of PR (6), writing (4), males and men (3), glamour (3), “soft” nature of PR (3), women as better communicators, power. There were a further seven topics raised.

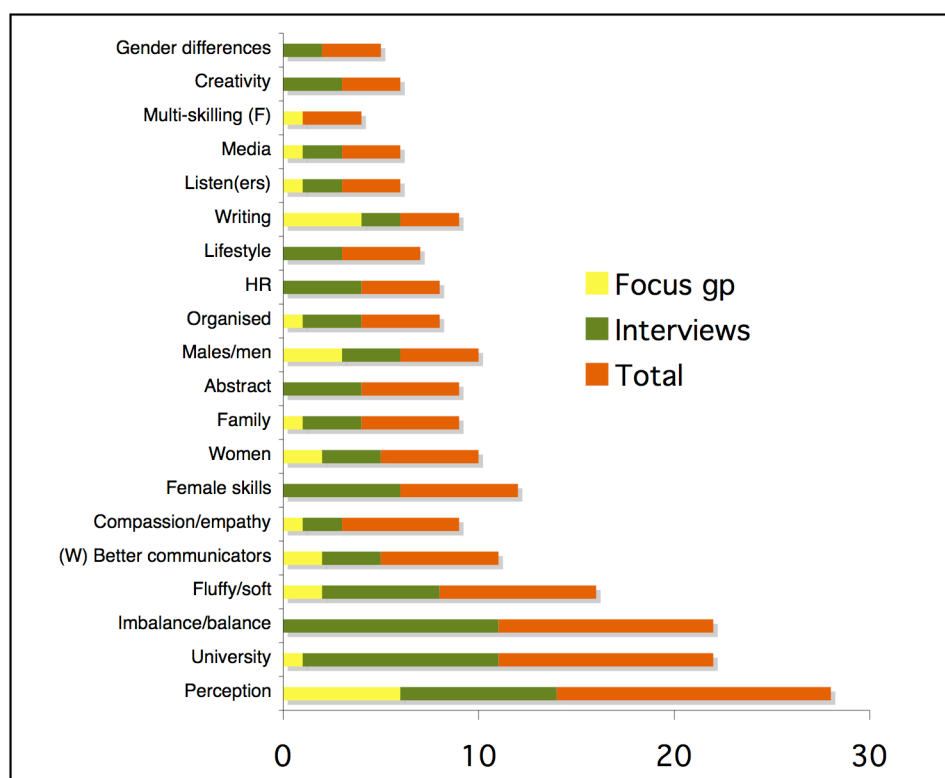


Figure 58: Most talked-about professional interview and focus group topics.

6.2.2 Professionals' interviews

The first round of interviews began in November 2005 and concentrated on professionals. Interviews were largely conducted at venues of the subject's choosing, which usually was a coffee lounge, or the subject's workplace. This proved to be convenient and allowed to subjects to be at ease in an informal situation, thereby facilitating participation. In-person interviews were necessary, as in most instances I had not met the subject. The personal contact helped facilitate the discussion and opened the door to additional contact at a future date. Ethics approval was gained by subjects earlier signing a form (in the survey) to signal their intention to participate. They

were informed before the interview that it would be recorded, that their involvement was voluntary and that they or their company would not be identified. Interviews were stored on my personal computer at home and later transcribed. Files were converted to MP3 format and are included on disc in annex S.

After the first two interviews it became apparent that professionals, despite their years of experience and wide knowledge of the industry, could not precisely identify why the industry had become female-dominated. This was simply explained by the fact that they had never thought of the issue until it was put before them in this study. However, as evidenced by the above, there was a good deal of discussion, which should form the basis of further research into the subject. All agreed that my study was interesting and were interested in the outcomes.

The more experienced male practitioners had extremely strong opinions on the way the industry had developed, with most agreeing the calibre of female practitioner was generally poor, as evidenced by comments such as:

If someone could answer me why is it more difficult for females to pick up the 'corporate' reins of an account, I'd love to hear it. I could actually develop an education package that could be slotted into the universities. It just seems to me that the young guys have a better understanding of business. That's probably a slight on female practitioners, and it's not meant to be. It's just that when they come through, it is a significant effort to get them thinking about corporate reins, particularly investor relations. Things like profit, triple bottom line and such mean nothing to them (senior consultant).

A senior government PR manager was much more forthcoming in his observations of the way the industry has developed.

There's a whole lot of blondes out there in black dresses who are very good at functions, but when they come to write press releases they create 'lobsters' (with a whole lot of shit at the head). They just can't nail it in the first three paragraphs.

And this, from another private industry practitioner:

I attended a national PRIA event about five or six years ago, at which 212 people attended. Six were male. I worked as an in-house 'associate' with one of (the city's) largest PR operations a year or so back for about 12 months. This company occupies 80 per cent of the 18th level. They employed a mix of 30-plus full and part-time staff of which only myself, the MD and three others were males (two of which often did crisis management seminars on-site at coal mines etc). That's more like an 88 per cent female dominance by my reckoning. This gender imbalance by itself didn't really bother me. It is, however, the lack of any real 'humour' in and about the workplace – everything all serious and self-important.

Whatever one's views, these three practitioners have a combined 74 years experience between them, and their opinions can not be ignored. However, none could answer why the industry had become female-intensive.

Respondents, both students and professionals, commented on the characteristics of PR practitioners in the survey questions and interviews. Both groups had similar opinions of what comprised the typical characteristics of people entering the profession. This correlated to research uncovered in the literature review, which found that females possessed certain qualities deemed necessary to be successful in PR. Respondents agreed that PR practitioners possessed the following characteristics: ability to listen, good communicators, organised and can write well. This was in evidence, given the following excerpts from interviews.

FEMALE STUDENT: Males in PR seem to be a little bit more sensitive than other males students in other disciplines. They are more organised and methodical. The majority of them, I guess, seem to have more feminine characteristics. You can talk to them more easily than some of the other male students. They possibly don't fit in with what might be termed the general male culture. They're very creative, with innovative ideas and very helpful, when I've done group work with them. I haven't had to ask for their work. They're quite organised. But they're not quite as helpful as females. I just think those qualities are needed for a PR person to be successful, and women generally have them more than men.

MALE STUDENT: When I was the only guy in a group I was constantly trying to get them to do things my way. I found a lot of their writing was a lot more flowery. I guess if you're trying to make things positive for the client they could do it. But I found myself better at organising or managing things in the group situation. Maybe they were better at the creativity, and I was better at managing. Maybe that comes back to the view that men lean towards more business-related subjects.

MALE PRACTITIONER: Women are very good communicators (in general), they have an ability to articulate information in a manner that is often easily understood and coherent. As such they actually have the starting point for being a PR practitioner. They are excellent communicators; they are good at telling a story, they are good at writing, they actually enjoy writing. And writing is the critical aspect, whether male or female, which takes people down a potential career in PR.

MALE PRACTITIONER: I think physiologically and mentally (left-brain, right-brain) there are differences in the way males and females work, and their approach to things. But some of the planning women do are better than men; particularly event management. They have that attention to detail (such as colour) and I don't mean that to be sexist. But things like that can add value to an event.

MALE PRACTITIONER: Men and women do communicate differently. Women are naturally better communicators. I think women are certainly generally more empathetic than males, and that certainly helps in PR. One of the other areas that women excel in is that they are better organisers. Most of them, when they try to tell us why they want to be in PR, they name event management as the reason. Either they have an interest in organising things, or they have an interest in parties. That's fine. Either interest is valid, but they're in it for their organisational ability. It's one of the reasons women thrive. They are good documenters and they are thorough. The people who are good at PR are usually somewhere in the centre. The good males have some of the feminine characteristics: the ability to build relationships, have empathy, communicate clearly. The very good women also have some of the necessary robustness to be tough and use in negotiations, and some of the slight aggression you need to have to work with the media. It's a hybrid type of person.

One thing is clear: PR has changed over the years, reflected not only in the number of women but in the way it is learnt and the way it is practised. This was borne out in an interview with one of Perth's most senior male professionals, who observed:

The lifestyle stuff is still mainly the women's preserve. This, of course makes them valuable in PR, because that's where the modern marketing style of PR find its outlet. To me that is the major part of PR today and that's where women are fitting in. It's the lifestyle aspects of PR that is emphasised.

This view seems to resonate with Rickertson (1999) who points to the growth in newspaper 'lifestyle' sections. He compared editions from Melbourne's *The Age* newspaper in 1956 and 1996. "There was the same amount of 'hard' news, despite a three to fourfold increase in the paper's size." It poses the question of whether the rise in the 'fluffy' side of journalism, as a possible consequence of our clamour for material things, has prompted a subsequent rise in the 'fluffy' side of PR, often mentioned by this study's respondents.

6.3 Conclusions

The interviews with students and professionals provided a more detailed insight into the mindset of today's PR participants, in line with the 'rich' nature of the research. While limited by their sample size, they nevertheless contain the opinions of the local industry's most senior 'players', and those of future practitioners. In keeping with the 'rich' nature of this study's research, all interviews are fully transcribed within the annexes. Quite clearly, imbalance is something that both groups are well aware of. There was a common theme among males that PR was seen to be "ambiguous" and/or "fuzzy". This fits in with a general perception that males are attracted to more business-like subjects where results are measurable. The material gleaned from students was, at best "sketchy"; possibly due to them being not used to present their opinions. On the other hand, the professionals were, as expected, more forthcoming in their answers. In general, both students and professionals agreed that PR suffers from a perception that it is "soft". Both groups highlighted the way PR is perceived, which, for me, seems to be at the core of the problem. The subsequent interviews also reinforced these views, with both groups agreeing that PR practitioners need certain qualities (also reflected in the literature). These qualities included listening and writing ability, which were accepted by most participants as inherently feminine qualities.

7 Summary

My study has contributed immensely to my personal and professional learning and development. It has further developed my research, interviewing and academic writing skills. It has expanded my view of the workplace, and allowed me to look at fields I had not previously considered in my academic career: most notably the field of work and gender, and subjects including sociology and psychology. Additionally, it has also honed my ability to work to deadline and enhanced my organisational skills. This was achieved by an almost-daily routine of either reading or writing something, and by being meticulous in recording Readings and making relevant notes. From a methodological viewpoint, I gained further understanding of how to gather, analyse and present statistical information, with widespread use of programs used to present data (notably SPSS and Excel). I also became adept at using a textual qualitative research program, HyperResearch. Most importantly, it has allowed me to explore a subject I was intrigued by, and present that information to a (mostly) receptive audience – the people involved in my study: PR professionals.

The staff at Central Queensland University most influenced by the research are my supervisors, Prof. Alan Knight and Kate Ames. Like the industry professionals and students, both Prof. Knight and Ms Ames were interested in the subject from the start, and continued their enthusiasm (and support) throughout. The high level of involvement, I put down to the fact that the research was not only original, but was about something that people in the profession knew was occurring, but had not been explored in any detail. Being the first Study of its type, this thesis has provided a starting point for other academic studies. Prof. Knight has commented several times of different aspects of my study which have surprised him – apart from the obvious gender imbalance. These included the fact that professionals and students are not primarily driven by money; that there is (alleged) gender discrimination within PR, and that tourism and entertainment are the two most

preferred areas of PR that students want to work in. These are, no doubt, all subjects for separate research projects.

From an industry perspective, practitioners and students have been influenced by this Study. This was evident from the start, with the strong numbers responding to the surveys, and their willingness to follow progress with regular updates. There were a total of 63 practitioners who received regular updates. E-mail feedback from the approximate bi-monthly updates was encouraging, although spasmodic (but not expected). Academics at all universities were interested, cooperative and encouraging, with all four universities involved in my study providing statistics and allowing me to personally present pre-survey information on my study to students. Some even collected the information for me.

Students, in Australia and overseas, also showed interest. I was interviewed by two Canadian students for a post-graduate course; by a journalism student at Notre Dame for an assignment, and provided information to a UK-based male post-graduate student in the UK.

Further interest was demonstrated by the PRIA, which published several of my articles on its national web-site and in the Western Australian and Queensland branch magazines. I was also invited to present my findings to the Queensland branch of the PRIA (at a date yet to be arranged). The journal *PRism*, published by Bond and Massey Universities, printed an article, as did the UK PR magazine, *Beyond Spin*.

One of the most positive aspects of my study has been that it has brought about a change in policy of the Public Relations Institute of Australia, which will now maintain membership statistics, with a gender breakdown. As mentioned, prior to this study this was not the Institute's practice. The collection and archiving of membership statistics will enable future gender trends to be tracked more easily. It has also made the PRIA more aware of the trend and of possible implications for the profession.

The research undertaken can certainly contribute to the wider body of knowledge about the PR industry. While my study raises more questions than it answers, it acts as a catalyst for future research, which needs to be conducted over ensuing years and with a wider range of subjects. The inclusion of the PRIA and all major tertiary institutions that teach PR are necessary for a full picture to emerge. This thesis will act as a base that will serve to inform and help guide subsequent PR industry gender studies. The fact that this is the first major project on this subject provides original findings that should be used to better understand the motivations and aspirations of PR students. Industry research on the changing gender composition of PR is also necessary. Questions also need to be asked concerning whether feminisation is affecting the industry.

The surveys were the first among the 'PR industry' in Australia (and to date the most comprehensive in the Western world) to examine people's views on this topic, and to gauge their opinions on the reason for the phenomenon. There were three surveys undertaken, among the Perth "PR industry". These consisted of two surveys among industry professionals (consultants, government, non-profits and in-house practitioners) and one survey (on-line and print) among 116 second and third-year PR students.