

**P**UBLIC Relations in the more developed countries, including South Africa, is enjoying growth rates unprecedented since the discipline as we know it today developed after the Second World War.

Percentage growth in annual expenditure on in-house and consultancy PR in recent years has, in several countries, breached the 30 percent barrier – significant even in areas such as South Africa, where unhealthy inflation rates prevail.

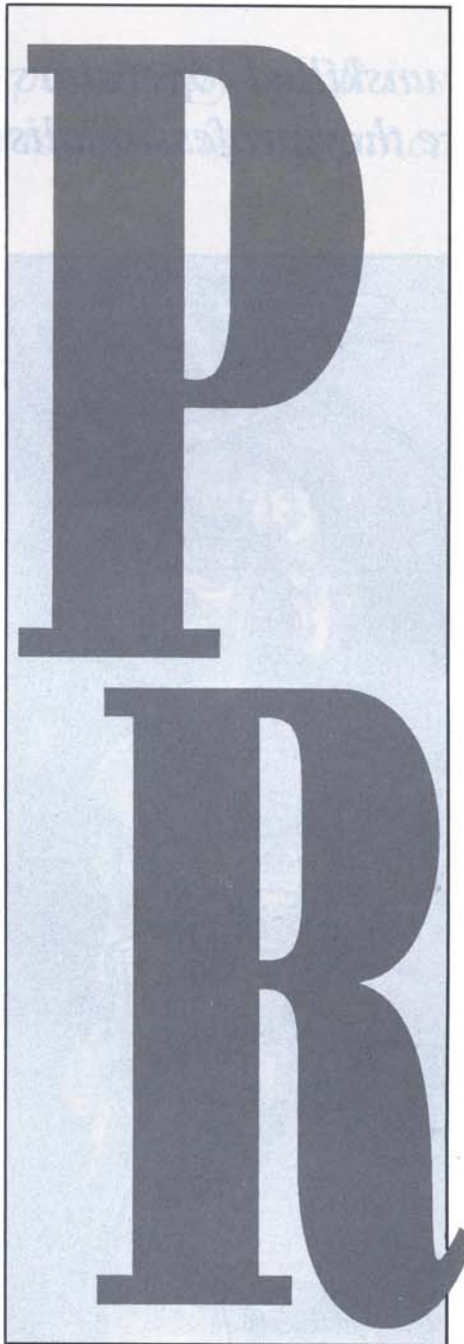
International and local assessments have indicated that a variety of factors have led to the growing recognition of public relations as an important ingredient in modern business management.

One of the most potent has been rising concern over environmental or “green” issues, particularly in America, Europe and Japan where alarm at pollution and damage to the very fabric of nature has reached the point where these abuses have become election issues.

The consequent need for organisations to develop and maintain appropriate programmes, communicate with a variety of audiences and be alive to trends and perceptions at home and abroad has created new responsibilities and a consequent demand for competent PR people.

Today’s top leaders have a much more comprehensive understanding of the “younger” professions such as marketing and Public Relations, and this has led to increased use of PR, too.

**T**here is little doubt that the new generation of broadly experienced and trained chief executives now starting to dominate the business scene have a more educated appreciation of the power and capabilities of Public Relations than ever before. Many of today’s top leaders not only know what can be achieved by professional PR; they are also aware of the type of person and skills needed for the planning and implementation of major strategies which ultimately affect the bottom line.



# COMES OF AGE IN South Africa

By Brian Cullingworth

This trend will continue as the top echelons of management are increasingly occupied by the new breed, and the old becomes more expert in combining the wide range of management skills at their disposal to maintain the competitive edge and position their organisations to best advantage in the communities where they operate.

This improved perception and understanding of Public Relations is not only being experienced in the business world; greater use, both here and overseas, is currently being made of the full range of professional PR skills by national and local government, forces and philanthropic bodies.

The old-fashioned concept of Public Relations as the product publicity or “whitewash” agency is fading as the *science* of Public Relations expands to new dimensions.

**W**hilst it is true to say that marketing communications remains an important element in the PR manager’s portfolio, this is only one of several key activities which the true PR professional should be capable of handling to the highest levels of efficiency.

These may embrace internal communications and audits; professional research for PR scenarios, initiatives, results and perceptions; political lobbying and liaison; strategic planning and leader counselling; strategic philanthropy; industrial relations communications and media liaison.

This calls for command of a range of ancillary technical skills which enable the PR manager to marshal a variety of techniques and disciplines in planned and accurately budgeted combinations to achieve particular objectives.

Not least amongst these skills is communications technology, a diverse field where huge technological advances in computers and electronics in recent years have created the ‘global village’ concept and revolutionised the public relations practitioner’s approach in media and techniques, imposing additional demands for trained and experienced professionals.

In recent years we have seen serious  
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## Communicators

*“Unqualified and unskilled ‘operators’ should plan for a future where they professionalise or move”*

### CONTINUED

issues turning on effective communications which have involved the advertising and PR collaborative interface in integrated campaigns.

The heavy use of media strategy in the Consgold-Minorco takeover bid; the Alaskan oil spill disaster; the Namibian issue and political manoeuvring; growth trends towards the privatisation of para-statal and increased aggression in AIDS and anti-apartheid campaigns, to name but a few. These all illustrate exciting areas of Public Relations activity.

Perestroika in East-West relationships, the effective demise of Communism and its impact on business strategies and communications in a world hitherto split between conflicting ideologies has contributed towards our stimulating new environment, whilst the radical changes in the coming decade in Hong Kong, and the new commercially unified Europe offer further opportunities.

Above all, the saner and more mature tendencies of advanced nations to communicate and negotiate their way out of warlike confrontation and its awful consequences hopefully heralds in a new and more peaceful era of collaboration in a world which is shrinking due to the speed and efficacy of modern communication.

The third principal reason for the international growth of PR is both a cause and an effect, for to deliver the goods required by a knowledgeable and results-oriented leadership in a massively challenging environment there has to be a relatively trained and experienced public relations practitioner.

Therein lies the death knell for the many unqualified and unskilled ‘operators’ who have so damaged the reputation of this young profession. The chancers should plan for a future where they professionalise or move, for they will not survive in the exciting years which lie ahead for committed PR

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professionals with the requisite training and qualifications.

How has the public relations profession in Southern Africa geared up to meet the new challenges?

In common with similar professional bodies in the more developed countries, the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA) has in recent years prepared serious practitioners to take their place in the rapidly evolving new order.

South Africa has been amongst the front-runners in the international

development of PR professionalism, particularly over the past nine years, and this impetus is being maintained in consultation with similar bodies to PRISA in the United States, Britain, Canada, France and Australia.

The objective has been to provide an internationally recognised, practical framework within which practitioners can develop themselves, at the same time providing a structured range of courses for entrants to the profession.

Internationally, there is consensus that certain criteria differentiate between vocations and professions.

To illustrate SA's PR professionalism, therefore, one should look at these fundamental criteria in juxtaposition with the current PRISA situation.

1. The formation of a professional body, voting membership of which must be restricted by experience and qualification. PRISA has been in existence for 31 years, has internationally accepted restrictions and boasts a membership of well over 3 000 practitioners.

2. There must be a formal multi-tiered education and training programme. Here in South Africa, PR practitioners not only have an ongoing variety of professional development events, but education ranges from three and five-month college courses at the lower end, through three-year technikon National Diplomas to first and master's degree courses at several universities.

Initiatives have been launched aimed at the provision of Doctorate level degrees and post-graduate business leadership modules.

3. Accreditation is an important requirement for professionalism. The Public Relations Council of South Africa (PRCSA) was formed several years ago to handle this facet, and accreditation is by examination of persons with certain minimum empirical qualifications in this country.

4. Practitioners must subscribe to an

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internationally recognised code of professional conduct and ethics. All members of PRISA, and accredited PR practitioners of the PRCSA, are bound by such a code, which is backed by disciplinary procedures.

5. There should be research and development of the profession on an ongoing basis. In South Africa this is an area dominated by academics at present, and more case history work by working practitioners is needed.

6. A detailed and documented Body of Knowledge which formally encompasses the skills and knowledge for efficient professional practice of the discipline is a major requirement which few countries have achieved in Public Relations. PRISA was the first Free World PR body to compile such a publication, and the Public Relations Society of America has recently followed suit.

PRISA therefore has the necessary framework within which committed practitioners can professionalise.

The message for South Africans, whether they are in the public or private sectors is that our community can boast a small but growing core of highly competent professional PR managers and consultants.

More people are fast coming up through the educational and experience ranks within the PRISA framework, and the future supply of the right sort of practitioners is being seriously addressed in the process.

Part of the professionalism drive has been the formulation by PRISA of a competence and status structure, which gives levels of status and qualifications, and the duties which persons at those levels should be capable of performing with optimum efficiency. This guide is obviously of value to a wide range of people involved in Public Relations, not least of which are potential employers or clients who can develop a better idea of what PR is really all about, what their particular needs are and what sort of qualified per-



son they require to achieve their PR objectives.

Public Relations, public affairs, corporate communications – all are titles which have been used to identify either parts or the comprehensive practice of this new and vigorous profession. It is a profession which is here to stay as a management skill interfacing with almost every aspect of an organisation's operations and activities.

The scope of responsibility is simply too wide and too great to leave in the hands of the unskilled and untrained, and

in the same way marketing has developed into an accepted management profession, Public Relations is fast approaching a similar status.

Public Relations executives are now starting to make their appearance in the top levels of management as a consequence.

The continued growth and development of Public Relations will depend on continued commitment to the highest standards of practice and conduct by PR people, and implicit in this is a determination by those members to professionalise.

Certainly that commitment is manifested by members of PRISA at various levels of education and experience, and the future supply of motivated and qualified people looks promising.

PRISA is currently researching the question of legislative protection for the title and/or practice of Public Relations, and a major, strongly financed information campaign is planned for the near future. This will be aimed at advising certain target audiences such as business and government leaders on the true position of PR as a professional practice, and the dividing line between the real professionals and “the others”.

Those private and public sector organisations which are sufficiently progressive to recognise the need for Public Relations specialists would be wise to seek out the right people to entrust this sensitive portfolio to. Those people hold specific empirical, professional and educational qualifications for the practice of their diverse craft, for Public Relations has come of age in this most dynamic and challenging world in which we live.

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