

# **Perceptions of professionalism: Practitioner reflections on the state of Australian public relations**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper highlights Australian public relations practitioners' perceptions of the current state of their profession, based on a study conducted in late 2007/early 2008.*

*Approximately half the respondents were non-members of the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA), indicating that the representativeness of the peak professional body remains at best questionable. This has implications for standards of practice, compliance with codes of ethics (Bowen, 2007) and, ultimately, the professionalisation of the field. Despite global efforts by professional associations to develop the public relations body of knowledge, enforce higher ethical standards, and encourage certification and accreditation – the three defining characteristics of a profession (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006; Grunig & Hunt, 1984) – research results indicate that public relations in Australia continues to be regarded as a 'semi-profession' (Dozier, 1992). Despite seeing some improvements, respondents reported a continued need to educate employers, management and the general public about the roles and responsibilities of public relations. Concerns were also raised about the ability of professional bodies – specifically the PRIA - to handle ethical issues and misconduct, in order to protect the standing and reputation of the field.*

## **Introduction**

This paper aims to provide a snapshot of Australian public relations practitioners' perceptions of the current state of the PR profession, as result of a nationwide survey conducted in late 2007/early 2008. The focus will be predominantly on the qualitative aspects of the study, highlighting patterns emerging from the open ended questions posed. Based on responses from 321 practitioners, this study by no means claims to be comprehensive. However it offers some insights into current perceptions about the profession, in particular the role played by the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA), which claims to be the 'peak' national professional body. The paper will proceed as follows. Firstly, a brief introduction to the ongoing debate about the professionalisation of public relations will be provided together with some comments on the meaning of the term 'professional' in the contemporary world and the role of professional bodies. The second half of the paper presents qualitative data obtained from the survey. The findings indicate that public relations in Australia is still largely perceived as only a 'semi-profession'. There appears to be a lack of consensus about the

role the peak professional body should play and some concern amongst practitioners as to the PRIA's current effectiveness.

## **Occupation, trade, or skill set? Moving towards professionalism**

A 'young profession' (Bowen, 2007), a semi-profession (Dozier, 1992), or even an occupation (L'Etang, 2008; L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006) - public relations has been called many things. However, there has been a long standing debate around the quest for greater professionalisation. There are many definitions of what characterises a 'profession' and what it should entail. However, public relations literature predominantly refers to three key characteristics: the development of a PR specific body of knowledge; ethical standards enforced by a regulatory industry body; and certification, accreditation and registration as pre-requisites for practice (Cutlip et al., 2006; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Although some practitioners may take professional status for granted, according to strict sociological criteria, public relations is not a profession (L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006). Currently, anyone around the globe can call themselves a public relations practitioner and offer their communications advice and services on a paid basis. Not surprisingly, there has been a continuing strong interest in professionalism on the part of educators, researchers, and practitioners with the aim of avoiding encroachment by other disciplines, increasing the standing of the field and achieving greater recognition.

It has been argued that one barrier to greater professionalism stems from the fact that practitioners and scholars operate in 'different worlds' (Van Ruler, 2005). In addition, public relations suffers from a lack of delineation, weak boundaries, and 'encroachment' from other disciplines such as marketing (Gupta, 2007; L'Etang, 2008; Wu & Taylor, 2003) human resources (L'Etang, 2008) and even law (Berger & Reber, 2005). As a result, scholars have been calling for closer links and relationships between academics and practitioners (Kirat, 2006; J. L'Etang, 2008). While there has been consistent effort by professional associations, scholars and educators worldwide to encourage the development of professional characteristics, the practical effects on practitioners appear to be somewhat limited (Van Ruler, 2005).

## **Research into professionalism**

Green, Keller and Wamsley (1993) argued that so-called classical professions held high status not because their members held a specific job or occupation but because they encapsulated a way of life. In contrast, professionals today rely mainly on scientific or technical knowledge to justify their status (Green et al., 1993). It has been suggested that contemporary professions draw heavily on the system of guilds developed in Europe in medieval times, particularly in terms of progressive competency grades, barriers to entry and, as a consequence, the ability to control the supply of professionals relative to demand for their services (Enright, 2006). For Bivins (1993), who was writing specifically about public relations, service to the public or acting in the public interest is the principal criterion of a profession. Gargan (1993) described the redefinition of occupations as professions as one of the defining characteristics of the past century. According to Gargan (1993), professions are based on bodies of specialised knowledge

and related skills. Organisational structures associated with professions include university programs and professional associations both of which attempt to set ethical standards and encourage trainees and more experienced practitioners to uphold them (Gargan, 1993).

Professionalisation in public relations has been a major theme in the literature of the field since at least the 1970s (Grunig, 1976). Some argue that public relations requires its own identity, as well as clearly defined professional parameters in order to reinforce its recognition, legitimacy and societal standing (Kruckenberg, 1998). However, others claim that it is exactly its current complexity and diversity that foster creativity and job satisfaction, which potentially could be lost by “prescriptive protocols and techniques that can be applied mindlessly” (Steiner, 1999, p. 12). With the majority of studies into professionalism originating in the 1980s and 1990s, recent scholars have identified a lack of current empirical research into the professionalisation of public relations (Gupta, 2007; Niemann-Struweg & Meintjes, 2008). Instead, there has been a prevailing focus on opinion pieces, stating viewpoints in favour and against, rather than solidly grounded research.

Additionally, the focus has traditionally been on public relations in a US-focused context (David, 2004; Grunig, 2000; Sallot, Cameron, & Lariscy, 1997; Wu & Taylor, 2003). In recent years, increased attention has been paid to public relations in Europe (Van Ruler, Vercic, Buttschi, & Flodin, 2004; Wu & Taylor, 2003), and particularly Britain (Lages & Simkin, 2003; Pieczka, 2000; Pieczka & L'Etang, 2006). However, the focus remains relatively narrow potentially ignoring the insights to be gained from other cultures, as assumptions may only be transferred from one country or culture to another with extreme caution. A small number of recent studies, have shifted the focus to emerging public relations communities, such as South Africa (Niemann-Struweg & Meintjes, 2008), Taiwan (Wu & Taylor, 2003), India (Gupta, 2007) and the United Arab Emirates (Kirat, 2006), by providing a snapshot of the unique way in which public relations has developed and positioned itself on a regional or even country specific basis.

## **The role of professional bodies**

The Handbook of Global Public Relations states that there are not many strong, highly visible professional associations (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003). A recent European Delphi study highlighted Sweden and the UK as countries with flourishing associations (Van Ruler & Vercic, 2004). The Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) in the UK is the biggest association in Europe and arguably the second best known globally after the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). However, despite their ‘leading’ status, both associations only represent a fraction of those who claim to be engaged in public relations work in their respective countries (Ehling, 1992; Van Ruler, 2005). This in turn has serious implications on the way the profession is regulated (or not), particularly in regards to ethical practice.

While the role of professional associations is recognised throughout the professionalisation literature, there is a gap in dedicated empirical research into how professional bodies in public relations meet the needs of their members and foster

professionalism. With the exception of a 25-year-old US study into the motivating factors behind joining a professional body (or not) (Gilsdorf & Vawter, 1983), there is a dearth of relevant research. In Australia, a study focused on the status of PR at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century summarised two studies into practitioners' perceptions (Singh & Smyth, 2000), but largely based its findings on membership issues on a handful of interviews with PRIA national board representatives, rather than 'ordinary' practitioners.

The PRSA is usually quoted as the most developed public relations body due to its large membership, wide range of accredited courses and journals. The CIPR has raised its profile as one of three UK based professional bodies in the field, primarily due to being awarded a Royal Charter in 2005. In Australia, the PRIA has not hitherto attained comparable status. Membership numbers appear to be stable, if not on the decline. While the industry is growing and practitioners are increasingly moving up the career ladder and into boardrooms, PRIA currently has 2,629 financial members (private communication with Christian Carter, National Membership Officer, 23 June 2008), which indicates that the industry might actually have taken a step backwards since Singh and Smith (2000) referred to "around 3,000" members.

The key focus of this paper is on Australian-based practitioners' perceptions of the current state of public relations and their attitudes towards membership of their professional body. Although there are numerous definitions of a profession (Green, Keller & Wamsley, 1993), the existence of a governing body and regulation/accreditation are two of the key cornerstones. In Australia, like the rest of the world, membership of the national public relations professional body is not compulsory. This study looks at the key motivators for Australian practitioners joining the PRIA, and reasons against.

In 2000 Singh referred to the PRIA as "a strong national body with state councils representing professional communicators in Australia" (Singh & Smyth, 2000, p. 388), however, findings from the State of PR survey cast doubt on this statement. Founded in 1947 (Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2008), the PRIA has been operating as a non-profit organisation with nine separate entities. While 2008 will see the amalgamation of national, state and territory bodies into a single, national organisation, the fragmented operation in the past has arguably weakened the Institute's voice and limited opportunities to clearly position itself as the peak body for public relations professionals in Australia. As with most professional organisations, members must comply with its Code of Ethics. However since PRIA membership is voluntary, many practitioners fall outside its authority.

## **Methodology**

This paper is based on data received as part of a nationwide study into the State of Public Relations in late 2007/early 2008. The survey format was modelled on a 2001 survey into the State of PR in Western Australia, but adapted from a print to an online format, allowing practitioners around the country to access and complete the self-administered survey in their own time from the convenience of their desk. Data collection started with a posting of the survey details in all PRIA State and Territory eZines/newsletters, as well

as calls for contributions via email to industry contacts. In order to obtain a representative sample, the research team encouraged snowball sampling, which appears to have been relatively successful with more than half of final respondents being non-PRIA members. A second mail out followed in early 2008 via a PRIA national newsletter and member update. Researchers also made use of the Institute's Facebook site – with limited success.

Due to the methodology chosen, it is difficult to be categorical about the representativeness of the sample. However, 321 respondents is considerably higher than sample sizes in comparable recent studies, such as Gupta's (2007) Indian study (106), Niemann-Struweg and Meintje's (2008) South African study (49), and Wu & Taylor's (2003) study into the Taiwanese industry (22). The survey consisted predominantly of quantitative questions, however, this paper will focus specifically on the qualitative responses obtained in relation to membership of the PRIA and the perceived state of the *profession*.

The sample obtained does have some limitations. The majority of responses were received from Western Australian practitioners (44%), which may be explained either by practitioners' familiarity with the survey format from 2001 or potentially due to their familiarity with the research team and institution behind the study. Despite continuous efforts, it proved extremely difficult to obtain representative feedback from either Tasmania or the Northern Territory (2 responses each). Additionally, the largest age group represented in the study were 25-29 year olds (27%), which may be due to the enthusiasm of new practitioners, forwarding patterns or time commitments.

Overall respondents were highly qualified, with 90% holding a tertiary qualification, which is a slight improvement on the 2000 studies (Singh & Smyth, 2000). The majority held a Bachelor Degree, arguably due to the large number of young practitioners in the sample who have had better access to tertiary education in public relations than earlier generations (Singh & Smyth, 2000). Key subjects of study were marketing, communication, journalism and (predominantly) public relations, highlighting the strong standing of professionally-oriented degrees in Australia.

## **Findings**

Some 321 practitioners responded to the survey, of whom 48% were current PRIA members. This is a more representative and balanced split than in Gilsdorf and Vawter's (1983) US study into motivating factors behind joining a professional PR association. Respondents reflected all membership levels, with the majority of member respondents being capital 'M' Members (60.8%). Interestingly, three respondents identified themselves as 'Provisional Associates', a membership grade that was phased out in late 2006/early 2007. The median salary range of \$60,000-\$79,000 reflected the large proportion of respondents under the age of thirty, however, reported income covered all pay brackets including \$200,000 and above (9 responses).

## Membership: Key motivators

Three key motivators for obtaining PRIA membership clearly stood out: networking (predominantly with peers, but also with potential contacts and clients); access to industry information, news and best practice examples; and a commitment to professional development, fuelled by access to workshops, seminars and other professional development (PD) opportunities. Nearly half of respondents referred to networking opportunities and their personal commitment to professional development.

Peer support appears to be particularly crucial to sole-trading consultants and professionals working in small in-house teams. As one respondent explained: *“I work in a very small team so staying connected with the industry is important, so is the opportunity for continuing professional development”*.

Consequently, professional membership itself was stated as a means to add credibility to one’s work, amongst peers, via recognition at industry events and award functions, such as the annual Golden Target Awards, as well as in front of clients. While PRIA membership is not a practice requirement, a number of respondents noted that adding the affiliation letters behind one’s name *“adds credibility”* and *“looks good to clients”*. Whilst some respondents criticised the current membership system for providing practitioners from all walks of life with an opportunity to ‘buy’ credibility, others clearly stated immediate benefits as a motive for joining, with such comments as: *“looks good on my CV”*, eligibility to apply for certain (government) positions, eligibility to enter the Golden Target Awards and as a way to move into the industry, either as a student/graduate or as a ‘job changer’ (e.g. journalism to PR). In this context, opportunities provided via mentorship, either structured or informal, were listed by a number of - particularly younger - practitioners. As one respondent explained: *“Never having worked in public relations before, PRIA is a way to have guidance and mentors.”*

Responses also indicated that short term benefits for joining could easily grow into a long term commitment. In the words of one respondent: *“I joined as a student at Uni to help me enter the profession. I have been a member for 8 years”*.

However, a large number of respondents stated less self-centred reasons for joining, emphasising their commitment to and support for the profession itself. While some simply emphasised membership as part of their responsibility to belong to the *“professional body of my chosen career”*, others further emphasised altruistic reasons and a desire to *“make a contribution to my profession”*, and in some cases even a perceived duty to *“contribute to the professional standing of public relations in the community”*.

As one respondent explained: *“It is vitally important that public relations professionals are seen as such [professionals] - just as lawyers belonging to the Law Society and doctors belonging to the AMA”*. Further comments included:

*“I believe it is important to support the PRIA and hope that it will grow into a substantial [sic] and valued association.”*

*“Contribution to the development of the profession.”*

*“Support the development of the profession by supporting the professional body.”*

*“Keen believer in promoting the status of the profession.”*

Others were slightly more complacent, simply joining as it was perceived to be the “done thing” as encouraged by peers and employers. In fact, the offer by employers to cover the membership fee appeared to be a major motivating factor for many members in itself.

However, responses from current members prompted not only assurances of continuing commitment to the industry, but also highlighted a high level of cynicism regarding membership benefits and the role of the PRIA. When asked why they had chosen to become a member, one respondent replied: *“Good question - they offer practically nothing to academics except periodic entree to the industry. This is perhaps as it should be but I begrudge the PRIA their dues every year”*. A number of respondents expressed unhappiness with their own chapter, assuming that PRIA might offer more in other States and/or Territories.

### **Non-members: Reasons against PRIA membership**

The most dominant theme that crystallised from non-members’ responses was a level of complacency and lack of urgency in regards to PRIA membership. The most common response was that practitioners were *“currently looking into it”* [membership] or simply *“haven’t got round to it”* [joining] yet. References to perceived high membership fees were also made as well as comments from a number of practitioners who stated that the fact that their *“workplace doesn’t pay for it”* held them back from joining.

However, respondents included a large proportion (more than 15%) of former, either disgruntled or disappointed PRIA members, who decided against renewing their membership, either because they *“fail to see the value”*, or due a perceived *“lack of incentives to keep current members”*. The value of membership appears to be perceived as particularly relevant for company directors or sole traders, with a number of respondents commenting that they either did not see the need to become a member as their *“boss is”* or because they perceived professional membership as a benefit for *“external consultant[s]”*, but not for themselves in their current roles.

However, respondents did emphasise the perceived lack of value for money as a reason against taking up PRIA membership: *“there seems to be very limited benefits for the cost of membership”*. With a perceived focus on (*“very expensive”*) seminars and workshops, respondents felt that as a peak industry body the PRIA needed to be more visible and strategic and less *“Sydney focused”*. Respondents particularly questioned the role, professionalism, positioning and authority of PRIA beyond organising workshops and seminars: *“The PRIA offers no viable training and does not have the authority to take*

*action against industry charlatans. It needs some form of government regulatory backing”.*

Respondents also felt that the PRIA is focusing too much on entry level practitioners and students, with limited relevance *“for higher qualified professionals”*, or that services on offer simply had *“little relevance to [their area of specialism] government relations”*.

As a result, a large number of respondents found memberships of other institutes and bodies – such as the Australian Centre for Corporate Public Affairs (ACCPA), the Fundraising Institute of Australia (FIA) and the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) - more relevant; not only in terms of member benefits, but also in relation to the representation of their day to day work.

The membership criteria, and ultimately the implications for the profession, were particularly under fire. In the words of one outspoken and passionate respondent: *“Waste of time, does not seem to offer any real services to practitioners, more of a badge than an actual qualification – what kind of credibility can you expect when anyone with \$600 can just join in? Needs to be some kind of qualifying process to ensure that individuals and organisations are actually legit”*.

Furthermore, feedback from non-members emphasised a lack of communication and education about member benefits by the PRIA. A number of respondents were under the impression they could not join as their degree was from a non-affiliated university, they did not know any members that could nominate them, they lacked experience or they simply did not know enough about member benefits, the application process or the PRIA in general.

## **The state of public relations in Australia**

The final question of the survey invited practitioners to comment on their perception of the current state of public relations in Australia. Respondents agreed that public relations continues to be poorly understood by the Australian public, which sees it predominantly as ‘spin’ and not as a widely respected profession. PR advice remains poorly valued when *“matched against other professions”*, such as law or environmental consultancy. The feeling was that PR still has a long way to go in developing as a recognised, valued profession. While some respondents believed that the value of public relations is slowly being better understood, alongside increasing salaries and levels of positions, others pointed out that management still frequently has to be educated about the value of professional communication, its contribution to the bottom line and what it actually entails. While larger companies may be prepared to invest their resources in communication, smaller businesses need more persuasion, with a perceived focus on outsourcing communications work rather investing in dedicated in-house teams; *“which is good for me as a consultant,”* explained one respondent, *“but for the welfare of internal communications and consistency of message I believe this is a fundamental problem.”*

As a consequence, a number of practitioners commented on *public relations* as a title being outdated, due to negative, derogatory connotations, such as “generating press” and publicity. In the words of one respondent: *“Anyone who lists their occupation as ‘PR’ is either good at throwing a party or making a splash in the social pages of a Sunday paper.”* ‘Communications’ was widely perceived to be a more appropriate label for the work of industry professionals.

Respondents confirmed perceived continued encroachment particularly by other communication disciplines, such as marketing. While partnerships with other communications fields such as research, social marketing and web2.0 were positively recognised, some respondents felt that there is a need for a clearer differentiation from other professions and services, to avoid being labelled ‘marketing’ or seen as purely an element in the marketing communications mix.

The reputation of the industry was perceived as a major challenge, with a feeling that *“a few cowboys give highly professional practitioners a bad name”*. Consequently, the study indicated a perceived need for the industry’s peak body, the PRIA, to take more of a leadership role and proactively build the profile of the ‘profession’. Ironically, public relations as a profession continues to be in urgent need of some PR help and advice itself, in order to *“rectify public mistrust”*. Currently, the PRIA is not perceived to accurately represent the industry and is *“becoming increasingly irrelevant”* or in the words of one respondent: *“doomed unless it changes to reflect the changes in the industry”*. Whilst some respondents were counting on current (constitutional) changes to bring about change, others commented on the Institute’s perceived poor record of handling ethical issues and the quality of recent conferences. Respondents called for more regulation and stronger advocacy from the *“professional bodies”*, particularly relating to ethics and standards in order to combat the perception that the industry is full of *“spin doctors”* and that the ‘job’ can be done by anyone without specialised training. Respondents also commented that as an industry *“we are [not] sharing and learning from best practice enough”*. It was felt that it is time for practitioners to stand up in their own defence and educate employers and the public about the value of qualifications and ethical practice as well as to start speaking up in response to negative coverage by the media:

*“It allows its reputation to be constantly trashed by the media, and remains meekly and supinely mute. The media in this country is more hopelessly lazy, mendacious and incompetent than its [sic] ever been. It feeds off the pr industry daily, yet lashes it as disreputable on a regular basis... all without a peep from the industry in its own defence. Utterly gutless and pathetic!”*

Consequently, research and evaluation was identified as key area for increased attention, in a move towards accountability and demonstrated return on investment (ROI). It was felt that individual practitioners have a responsibility to demonstrate the *“ROI of all strategies and campaigns”* in order to demonstrate PR’s viability as business function. However, there appears to be a need for better measurement tools; *“for example, how do you measure keeping issues out of the media?”*

Respondents felt that there were “*too few males*” entering the industry and that graduates were lacking writing skills. The industry was perceived to be highly geared towards the media and journalism. In order to ensure the “*future survival of the industry*” more emphasis would be needed on communications with all stakeholders, including employees, who may have been neglected in the past. As a result of the current economic ‘boom’, Western Australian practitioners particularly commented on a lack of trained and qualified staff, with experienced people “*getting poached left, right and centre*”.

However, on a positive note respondents felt that the industry was heading in the right direction, with companies starting to place more value on communications, particularly in comparison to other elements of the ‘marketing mix’. Respondents identified lobbying, corporate relations and particularly social media as “growth areas”.

## **Discussion**

At the turn of the century Singh and Smyth (2000) referred to the Public Relations Institute of Australia as playing “*a strategic role in nurturing and developing strong relationships among the industry, academia, and the professional body*” ( p. 388). However, insights gained eight years later indicate that the PRIA’s representation as the peak professional body for public relations practitioners in Australia remains at best questionable. It appears not much has changed since Gilsdorf and Vawter’s (1983) US-based study into practitioners’ motivation to take up membership, and their perception of industry bodies. Although the study might be dated and had its weaknesses - particularly due to its focus on senior managers, rather than representing a cross-section of the industry - 25 years on research into the state of the Australian industry highlighted very similar issues. As in 1983 North America, when asked about membership benefits respondents commented on the perceived limited relevance of their industry body, limited return on investment for membership and inadequate membership standards. As in the US study, respondents included a large number of disappointed or even disgruntled past members. Equally, as in the 25-year-old study, the most important reason for joining was the opportunity to exchange practical ideas with other industry representatives.

Ethics and professionalism were strong themes in this study, particularly amongst current members, who saw their professional membership as an opportunity to legitimise their practice, add credibility and support the professionalisation of the industry by supporting its peak body. Non-members were equally aware of the push towards professionalisation, but were highly critical of the PRIA’s influence and authority as well as its perceived lack of commitment to monitoring industry standards. Although the PRIA, in contrast to some respondents’ perceptions, has some authority to take action against unethical or unprofessional practice, like most codes of ethics the PRIA code provides “*no enforcement monitoring or recourse for [...] infringements, leaving them impotent other than the occasional revocation of association membership*” (Bowen, 2007, p. 5).

Despite this study’s initial focus on PRIA members, snowball sampling resulted in over half of respondents being non-members, including a large proportion of former PRIA members (including former state council members). The complacency or lack of urgency

in regards to professional membership as highlighted in this study reflects results from similar studies in other countries (Niemann-Struweg & Meintjes, 2008) and underscores one of the key global difficulties of the public relations industry, in that it is impossible to regulate an industry with a large proportion of non-professional body members. The Global Public Relations Alliance estimates that only 10% of the approximately three million plus PR practitioners worldwide are members of an institute or professional body (Valin, 2005). As membership is voluntary, most Australian practitioners do not fall under the PRIA's auspices and consequently cannot be disciplined for non-compliance with its code of ethics. However, the issue of 'regulation' and compliance is complex. Even those bodies that have legislative authority to control ethical standards, such as the Australian Medical Association (AMA), face decisions about censure of unethical practice that are fraught with the prospect of litigation.

Respondents criticised the industry's lack of visibility and the peak body's failure to provide a strong industry voice or speak out against bad practice. However, any credible governing body needs to be backed by the profession itself. Currently, a range of other memberships are often perceived as more valuable and appropriate to PR practitioners' needs than PRIA membership.

Although the CIPR is frequently referred to as one of the best recognised and most successful professional bodies in the field, L'Etantg (2008) referred to professional status in the UK as "*still an elusive goal for PR practitioners*" (p41). Similarly, entry to the public relations field in Australia is not constrained by lack of qualifications or membership of the country's peak body. There continues to be a plethora of job titles (171 including variations in this study alone). Practitioners furthermore confirmed the general lack of understanding about the practice in Australian society and a considerable amount of media criticism, which the profession has so far failed to rebut. Ironically, it appears the PR industry is in need of public relations advice for itself, as the industry is battling with a less than flattering image in the media and a lack of understanding and appreciation across the Australian community.

## **Conclusion**

Despite a number of limitations in research design and particularly response rates, this study is one of the more comprehensive research projects conducted on the state of Australian public relations. The profession is currently undergoing a number of changes, including the long overdue amalgamation of state and territory bodies into a national peak association for practitioners. While the PRIA is unarguably keen to move forward, it will take time to win back discouraged members and to convince practitioners of its commitment and the value of professional membership. Further research will be necessary to confirm trends and characteristics identified in this study. However, the 2008 State of PR study has the potential to act as a benchmark for future research into the Australian industry, tracking the national move towards professionalisation. It also provides a platform for comparative research involving other nations.

Currently, the Australian industry is fragmented, with a large proportion of practitioners having joined other professional bodies or 'going it alone'. While on one hand there appears to be an alarmingly high level of complacency in regards to PRIA membership, members and non-members are emphasising the need for a strong industry voice to raise the profile and recognition of the industry. Public relations is facing an image problem and encroachment by other communications disciplines, particularly marketing. In order to survive, it requires its peak body to step up to the challenge.

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