

Guidelines for good science PR

The following guidelines have been developed for all those involved in institutional science communication. Science public relations (PR) is one of various processes of interaction that make up institutional science communication. We understand public relations as the way in which institutions consciously shape their communication with internal and external dialogue partners. Science PR speaks for science in general but also for the institution that it represents.

Preamble

Science has an impact on many spheres in both private and societal life. It plays a foundational role in political, economic and personal development and decision-making. By furnishing new insights, technologies, procedures and ways of thinking, science changes society. In the process it also systematically tests its own results, methods, and premises. Science is characterized by specialization and ever-increasing complexity. It is thus increasingly difficult for many people to evaluate its potentialities and risks and to recognise possible conflicts.

While some citizens feel disconnected from this process, others are developing a new critical awareness towards science. More and more people see themselves not only as its beneficiaries or recipients but also as active participants. They want to have an influence. Social media are effective tools in this pursuit, be it in the form of blogs, discussion forums, citizens' initiatives or citizen science projects. These activities also introduce a large number of other sources of information, which include results and conclusions that themselves can be at least partially contradictory.

Citizens can further science or hinder it, can put their trust in it or not. This means that the importance of reliable information from and about science is ever increasing. Equally great is the responsibility that the manifold stakeholders involved in science communication must shoulder. Changes within the overall working environment have not only been due to developments within science and society. Due to dwindling resources, journalism is becoming less able to critically assess the reliability of information. At the same time, science PR has more opportunities to directly communicate with each citizen through the Internet and social media or through events and exhibitions. Expectations regarding the comprehensibility and quality of the information and services provided are thus correspondingly greater.

These dramatic changes call for a review, or reshaping, of current practices in science communication. The following guidelines are meant to address this issue.

Good science PR

- heightens awareness about, and respect for, the positions of **all** active participants. It provides an expansive view into science and its various disciplines and enhances the understanding of scientists' working methods and perspectives.
- discerns the questions, needs and dispositions - and possible fears and prejudices - of the citizenry and brings them to bear in scientific inquiry and in decision-making bodies. It supports and promotes dialogue between science and the society at large.
- promotes within scientific institutions an understanding of the questions and needs of journalists and encourages scientists to engage with representatives of the media.
- serves to extract from the mass of available information only that which is relevant for society. Self-interest cannot be the sole criteria underlying this reductive process.
- remains true to the facts. It does not exaggerate when presenting research successes, nor does it trivialize or conceal risks. It avoids presenting information in a way that arouses baseless fears or

- hopes. It portrays research processes candidly and, when possible, provides open access to scientific sources. Good science PR fosters and organizes discussions about the opportunities and risks related to scientific methods and results.
- draws attention to the limits of research claims and methods. It assesses the information presented in terms of its importance to science and society and places it within the context of the current state of research according to the standards of scientific integrity. Science PR names sources and relevant contact persons. It reveals all stakeholder interests and financial relationships. It actively solicits this information from scientists.
 - encourages scientists to speak about themselves, their motivations and their work. Citizens are interested in more than just facts and information; they also want to know about scientific activity as a process and about the people doing the actual work.
 - ensures that information is processed and communicated such that it meets the needs of specific target groups. It utilizes tools and channels suited to each particular group and employs easily understandable language.
 - engages in self-reflection and self-criticism. It is both strategic and value-oriented* in the way it works and specifies standards for the quality of its own work, procedures and results. It assesses the efficacy of its efforts and avoids unnecessary or ineffective actions. It is transparent about its role and methods.
 - is open to societal changes and continuously adjusts its goals, strategies and actions on the basis of its values. For this purpose, it seeks to exchange information and cooperate with other actors in the realm of science communication. It makes use of national and international discussions about practices and research in science PR for its own work. It promotes exchange and cooperation among institutions as well as dialogue with all parties involved.

*These guidelines were developed by an inter-institutional working group that was initiated by Wissenschaft im Dialog and the Bundesverband Hochschulkommunikation.
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Our fundamental values of science communication:

- Truthfulness and credibility
- Societal benefits
- Transparency
- Willingness of the scientific world to engage in an active dialogue with society
- Self-criticism and willingness to change
- Independence
- Openness to cooperation by all participants
- The principles of good scientific practice

Source: Siggenger Denkanstoß 2013
<http://www.wissenschaft-im-dialog.de/ueber-uns/siggenger-kreis/>