

# Public Relations in The United States

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## Part 1: Background information

**Official Name:** United States of America



**Capital City:** Washington, D.C.

**Major Cities:** New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Dallas, Houston, Miami, San Antonio, New Orleans, Oklahoma City, Denver, San Diego, Seattle, Memphis, Indianapolis, Jacksonville, Boston, Anchorage

**Official Language:** No official language; however, 82.1 percent of the population speaks English, 10.7 percent Spanish, 3.8 percent other Indo-European, 2.7 percent Asian and Pacific Island, and 0.7 percent other.

**Type of Government:** Constitution-based federal republic with a strong democratic tradition

**Location:** North America, bordering both the North Atlantic Ocean and the North Pacific Ocean, between Canada and Mexico

**Currency:** US dollar

### **Culture (According to Geert Hofstede):**

There are only seven (7) countries in the Geert Hofstede research that have Individualism (IDV) as their highest Dimension: USA (91), Australia (90), United Kingdom (89), Netherlands and Canada (80), and Italy (76).

The high Individualism (IDV) ranking for the United States indicates a society with a more individualistic attitude and relatively loose bonds with others. The populace is more self-reliant and looks out for themselves and their close family members.

The next highest Hofstede Dimension is Masculinity (MAS), with a ranking of 62, compared with a world average of 50. This indicates the country experiences a higher degree of gender differentiation of roles. The male dominates a significant portion of the society and power structure. This situation generates a female population that becomes more assertive and competitive, with women shifting toward the male role model and away from their female role.

The United States was included in the group of countries that had the Long Term Orientation (LTO) Dimension added. The LTO is the lowest Dimension for the United States at 29, compared to the world average of 45. This low LTO ranking is indicative of

the society's belief in meeting its obligations and tends to reflect an appreciation for cultural traditions.

The next lowest ranking Dimension for the United States is Power Distance (PDI) at 40, compared to the world average of 55. This is indicative of a greater equality between societal levels, including government, organizations, and even within families. This orientation reinforces a cooperative interaction across power levels and creates a more stable cultural environment.

The last Geert Hofstede Dimension for the United States is Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI), with a ranking of 46, compared to the world average of 64. A low ranking in the Uncertainty Avoidance Dimension is indicative of a society that has fewer rules and does not attempt to control all outcomes and results. It also has a greater level of tolerance for a variety of ideas, thoughts and beliefs.

## **Part 2: Overview of the public relations industry**

### **History**

While public relations first took shape during the early years of the nation's existence through messages crafted by politicians and campaign advisers, modern practices came about in much more recent history.

In the 1850s, P.T. Barnum, of the Barnum and Bailey Circus, employed publicity tactics to gain audiences for his show. Shortly thereafter, many other companies and corporations used these tools to reach their target audiences.

Beginning in the early 20th century, Ivy Ledbetter Lee, often given the title of the first public relations practitioner, expressed his views on the relationship between businesses and their publics, and said that companies must properly inform consumers. He was one of the first professionals to use a news release for communication and laid the groundwork for the profession's future.

From this time until the mid-1900s, the profession became essential. With image crises such as the Great Depression and World Wars I and II on their hands, presidents and politicians sought public relations counselors to ease tensions and communicate their goals and programs to the people. Large companies also formed public relations departments, and many of the world's largest agencies were founded at this time.

A rapidly growing base of professionals brought about the founding of several public relations organizations, publications and codes of ethics. Such groups as the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and International Public Relations Association, founded at that time, still exist today.

As the profession expanded, so did the necessity for education in public relations. PRSA founded the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) in 1968, which, along with an increasing number of colleges and universities offering a public relations major

or specialization, allowed for the academic and experiential growth of future professionals.

Three main issues face the industry today: diversity in the workplace; new and social media; and integrated marketing communication (IMC).

- Diversity in the workplace — While counselors seek to promote differences of gender, ethnicity, background and opinion (among other traits) in their communication, the industry itself significantly lacks diversity.
- New and social media — These communication tools are increasingly important in targeting and reaching audiences. The issues include understanding how networking sites and new technology work; how they are used by audiences; and how to make these tools relevant to the company or client's line of work.
- IMC — Professionals must learn how public relations meshes with and positively contributes to IMC and the conglomeration of all business and communication factors.

### **Image and misconceptions**

In the United States, public relations is often misconstrued as simply company and client promotion. While professionals should show their bosses in a positive light whenever possible, true public relations involves much more. For example, crisis communication requires a speedy and honest response to the issue, with complete transparency regarding company responsibility and involvement, not lies and blame shifting. A significant portion of American society views professionals as “spin doctors” or “flaks,” who will twist a story around to get their perspective — a positive company viewpoint — in the news.

Organizations like PRSA strive to advocate ethically sound public relations practices through the PRSA Code of Ethics and other initiatives. Through their efforts to educate and change opinion, they hope to alter this incorrect public perception of the profession.

Characterize the relationship between public relations specialists and journalists in the country.

Professionals on both sides of the public relations and journalism relationship sometimes describe their dealings as tense, pained and difficult. Unfortunately, a great deal of these issues arises as a result of misunderstanding.

When the public relations professional pitches a potential story to a reporter or editor, he or she must realize the organizational pressures at work in the newsroom. Journalists have limited time, funding and resources. They must also present stories that inform and entertain their audiences. Understanding their deadline schedule and challenges allows professionals to work better with the media.

Conversely, members of the media must understand that some information may not be divulged as readily as expected or desired. Confidentiality and strategic thinking are at

the forefront of public relations work, and members of the media must understand ethical and company constraints.

Ideally, public relations professionals and journalists should develop a mutually beneficial working relationship. Such a bond allows each party to reach his or her goals — for the journalist, to produce an interesting and informative story; and for the public relations professional, to gain positive exposure for the client or company.

### **Ethics**

The dominant code in U.S. public relations is the PRSA Code of Ethics. Originally drafted in 1950, the code outlines specific goals for the advancement of the profession, as well as the professional values of honesty, advocacy and, among others. PRSA specifically expects its members to uphold these principles; however, the industry at large tends to abide by and respect these values as well.

Several laws and U.S. Supreme Court case rulings also put restrictions on the actions of public relations professionals.

### **Part 3: Overview of public relations as it relates to students**

Once students graduate from secondary education, many look to attend either two- or four-year colleges or universities for their undergraduate, or bachelor's, degree. There are two main tracks in undergraduate education. Students generally attend a four-year school and complete their degree at the same institution, or they attend a two-year school, obtain their associates degree, and move on to a four-year college or university to complete their bachelor's degree. From there, an increasing number of adults go on to receive their master's and doctoral degrees.

This major course of study often comes under different titles such as journalism, and may be offered as a specialization within a communications department. In order to qualify as a PRSSA Chapter, schools must offer at least five public relations classes within the areas of introduction to the field, writing, research, planning and strategy, and a supervised internship. Most schools offering a public relations major abide by these guidelines.

A detailed list of colleges and universities offering both public relations programs and PRSSA Chapters may be found at <http://www.prssa.org/resources/studypr07.pdf>.

### **About PRSSA**

In 1968, 20 years after it was established, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) founded the Public Relations Student Society of America. The declared purpose of PRSSA is to cultivate a favorable and mutually advantageous relationship between students and professional public relations practitioners.

The student society aims to foster the following:

- Understanding of current theories and procedures of the profession
- Appreciation of the highest ethical ideals and principles
- Awareness of an appropriate professional attitude
- Appreciation of Associate Membership in PRSA and eventually Accredited membership

Today the Public Relations Student Society of America has more than 9,800 members in 295 colleges and universities across 43 states and the District of Columbia

PRSSA's stated mission is twofold: first, to serve its members by enhancing their knowledge of public relations and providing access to professional development opportunities; and second, to serve the public relations profession by helping to develop highly qualified, well-prepared professionals.

The structure of PRSSA involves its Headquarters, located in New York City and operated under the guidance of the PRSSA director and staff, and the National Committee. PRSSA's National Committee is comprised of 14 members, including the national president; the immediate past president; seven vice presidents specializing in a variety of areas; the FORUM editor-in-chief; the PRSA board liaison; the PRSSA director; the national faculty adviser; and the national professional adviser. The student members are elected (national president and vice presidents) or appointed (FORUM editor-in-chief) at the National Assembly and serve a one-year term from June 1 to May 31 of the following year.

PRSSA provides its Web site as a prime communication tool between individual members and the Society's national leadership. Other media resources include PRSSA-Talk, the PRSSA mailing list; a bi-weekly e-mail to all members about upcoming events, news on National Committee initiatives and scholarship deadlines; Connecting with PRSSA, a bimonthly national newsletter; and FORUM, PRSSA's national newspaper produced three times each year.

Each year PRSSA and its sponsors give away nearly \$20,000 to winners in national scholarship and awards competitions.

An added benefit of membership in PRSSA is the opportunity to travel to exciting cities across the country to participate in professional and leadership development programs. Each year PRSSA hosts two national events and at least 10 regional activities. Recent destinations have included New York, Dallas, Miami, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Boston, Los Angeles, St. Louis, San Diego, Orlando, Baltimore and Nashville.

An underlying strength of PRSSA is its relationship with its parent Society, PRSA. People often say that public relations is about 'who you know' — and PRSA is that 'who.' With more than 20,000 members in 124 Chapters in the major public relations markets of America, the PRSA/PRSSA partnership offers a vast network of potential employers.

Each PRSSA Chapter has a parent PRSA Chapter. Members have the opportunity to be invited to PRSA events, including monthly luncheons and meetings, at little cost.

**Resources Used:**

CIA World Factbook (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>)

Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions (<http://www.geert-hofstede.com>)

Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management  
(<http://www.globalpr.org/>)

PRSA/PRSSA