

## Refining our mission: Research that matters to the practice

The Institute for Public Relations (IPR) supports and promotes *three kinds of research* (adapted from Dr. Jim Grunig):

- Research in public relations **to guide and evaluate** relationship-building and communications programs.
- Research on public relations helps us understand what we as professionals do and how we do it—**benchmarking and best practices**.
- Research for public relations, establishing the **social science underpinnings** of our work in five high-priority topic areas identified by the Board (see below).

*“The Institute for Public Relations Board wants to redouble our focus on research, tracking even more toward topics that matter to the practice: timely insights and applied intelligence that leaders in our field can put to immediate use.”*

Research Conversations blog, July 28, 2011

In 2011, we began reviewing all IPR programs and awards for their focus on research that matters to the practice. Richard Edelman’s Distinguished Lecture, “Reimagining Our Profession: Public Relations for a Complex World,” captured the role of research in that undertaking. Willard D. “Bill” Nielsen, former IPR chair and an Honorary

Trustee, accepted the Alexander Hamilton Medal, our most prestigious award for lifetime achievement in public relations.

Prof.dr. Cees B.M. van Riel accepted the Pathfinder Award for his research on corporate reputation and strategic alignment. Other IPR awards programs—including the Big Apple Best Use of Research Award, the Ketchum Excellence in Public Relations Research Award, the Grunig PRIME Fellowship, the International Public Relations Research Conference Top Paper Awards and the Jack Felton Golden Ruler Award—provided further leverage for our research mission. Programs such as our

Public Relations Executive Forum, Leadership Forum and the North American Summit on Measurement (variously presented with the Arthur W. Page Society, the Council of Public Relations Firms and the Public Relations Society of America) combined research reviews with practical case studies.

## Research on communication inside the organization

IPR’s Commission on Organizational Communication is developing an online knowledge base to help practitioners make best use of research that already exists in the area of internal communication and employee engagement. By aggregating and interpreting this knowledge, the Commission will be able to identify important gaps where more original research is needed by practitioners.

Already, the Commission is cultivating research ideas on organizational clarity as a competitive advantage, best-in-class organizational communication practices in a global environment, and generational communication.

Meanwhile, one member of this Commission, Dr. Bruce Berger, delivered the fourth annual Grunig Lecture in 2011, co-hosted by IPR, the

University of Maryland and the Public Relations Society of America. His presentation, “Employee Communication: Let’s Move From Knowing to Doing,” has been published by IPR.

*“Extensive research, dozens of award-winning case studies and a rich array of best practice workshops consistently highlight 15 or so drivers of effective employee communication. Many are linked to the behaviors and communication skills of senior leaders and front-line managers.”*

Research Conversations blog, Nov. 10, 2011

## Setting industry standards for research, measurement & valuation

In 2011, the IPR Board gave birth to an initiative to create a broad platform of standards and best practices for public relations research, measurement and evaluation. We have begun recruiting coalition partners who may already

*“Be prepared for RFPs, especially those emerging from purchasing departments, to require adherence to industry standards, best practices, and truly valid metrics. We have the opportunity now to develop our own standards.”*

Research Conversations blog, Nov. 1, 2011

be working on elements of a total platform and want to integrate their work into this broader effort.

The challenge facing public relations is the lack of universally accepted and agreed-upon

measures and processes to direct and gauge the performance of communications programs. Variation in research practices leads to uneven quality and confusion among internal and external clients. By harmonizing definitions and methods, standards will allow professionals to focus more on research, measurement and evaluation design and delivering critical insights to their clients. The standards platform will offer a master frame-work that can be applied to all types of public relations activities including traditional media relations, corporate communications and social media.

In related work, IPR’s Commission on Public Relations Measurement & Evaluation issued papers and presentations such as “Standardization in Public Relations Measurement & Evaluation” and “Charting Your PR Measurement Strategy.” We cooperated with the USC Annenberg School’s Strategic Communication and Public Relations Center to advance the methodology and broaden the reach of their GAP (Generally Accepted Practices) studies.

## Research to support a global profession

With the number of IPR Trustees and commission members located outside of the U.S. standing at 15 (and growing), our reach and impact on the practice of public relations is becoming increasingly globalized. Already, subscribers to our email research letter and visitors to our website can be found in 198 countries.

In September 2011, we staged our third European Professional Colloquium at Cliveden in the U.K. Two dozen communications officers from Europe, the Middle East and the U.S. gathered for in-depth research reviews and peer discussions of “Trust and Recovery.”

*“One of the characteristics of the world that motivates me is our interconnectedness. If you accept that people across the world—people like you and me—have many more similarities than differences, then inevitably you will find more opportunities than problems.”*

Research Conversations blog, Sept. 13, 2011

Our relationships in China continue to build with senior corporate and agency practitioners, academics and associations. For example, the China International Public Relations Association (CIPRA) and IPR are translating and re-publishing select articles, papers and research, and will cooperate in other ways.

Among the international research papers published by IPR or promoted in our blog and research letter were

Professor Tom Watson’s (Bournemouth University) columns, “PR History—What It Tells Practitioners” and “A Dialogue on ROI.” Koichi Kitami of Hokkaido University addressed “Corporate Crisis and Market Evaluation” in Japan.

## IPR's research roles & priority topics

In 2011, the IPR Board of Trustees reaffirmed five roles that this organization plays in supporting research:

- **Aggregator:** Identifying, publishing and promoting research that's important to practitioners.
- **Grantor:** Commissioning new research and using our awards for leverage to encourage research on high-priority topics.
- **Partner:** Amplifying our influence and reach through relationships with other organizations in the communications field and in business generally.
- **Interpreter:** Drawing actionable insights and intelligence from research, employing all communications channels (including our free website, research letter, social networking, convened forums, the annual lecture, speaking, media opportunities and channels yet to be developed) to share knowledge.
- **Convener:** Using research as the basis for programs where thoughtful practitioners can absorb and even contribute to research-based knowledge.

The Board went on to identify these current priority topics:

- What drives choice and changes behavior?
- Organizational communication.
- A broader context for social networking and what it means.

- Restoring reputation in an environment of extremely low trust.
- Models to predict the probability of public relationship outcomes across countries and cultures, audiences and generations.

*"Sir Winston Churchill is famously quoted as having said, 'Statistics are like a drunk with a lamppost, used more for support than illumination.' But if we are going to be effective counselors, we can't just validate—we have to illuminate."*

Research Conversations blog, Dec. 19, 2011

While we are developing research initiatives in each of these areas, a key example of our progress in 2011 is our "social science of social networking" project. This initiative goes beyond the benchmarking and metrics approach that characterizes almost all of the research we see in this area. IPR wants a deeper understanding of how social and emerging media are impacting networking and relationship-building, earning and influencing trust, building influence, improving reputation and controlling the socialization of ideas. We will start by providing a knowledge base of existing research on a new wing of the IPR website.

*For more information on any of these topics, please visit [www.instituteforpr.org](http://www.instituteforpr.org) and Research Conversations at <http://www.instituteforpr.org/blog/>*