# Public Relations in Japan: Expert Opinion on its Future

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## Introduction

The history of modern public relations in Japan starts with the occupation by the United States in the post World War II era (Inoue, 2003). With in-house corporate PR activities occupying the central role, and its small size despite the country's presence in the world economy, Japan's PR practice remains relatively marginal and unique for the time being (Cooper-Chen & Tanaka, 2008). Japan experienced so-called "lost decade" in the 1990s after the collapse of the economic bubble. Although the economy stagnated for almost ten years, Japan's economic structure went through structural change in this period (Yamazaki, 2000, Yoshikawa, 2002). PR firms in Japan find that the clients' needs have changed drastically in the past ten years (Nagae, & Morito, 2008). The purpose of this study is to find out how PR practices in Japan is going to change in the future.

## Existing Researches on PR Practices in Japan

Sriramesh, Kim, and Takasaki (2000), synthesized studies of public relations in three Asian cultures (India, Korea, and Japan). In each of the three countries, they conducted a survey and and interview/observation of public relations practitioners. The survey questions tried to compare the three countries in terms of four models of public relations - press agentry/publicity, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical models. They found that in these three countries, in addition to practicing the press agentry and publicity model, practitioners used the personal influence model to conduct their PR activities.

Watson and Sallot (2001) conducted a survey of highest ranking public relations professionals of corporations to see how management styles affect PR practices. They found that the management style in Japan has undergone changes over time and more than two-thirds of the practitioners perceive their own company's management style as a mix of both top-down "American style" and collaborative "Japanese style." They also found that practitioners who perceive their company's management style as collaborative see that the company has higher regard-for/excellence-in public relations than those who perceive their company's management style as top down.

Once every three years, the Japan Institute for Social and Economic Affairs (JISEA) conducts a survey of public relations departments of the members of JISEA and Keidanren (Japan Federation of Economic Organizations). The survey asks about the structure of PR department, collaboration with management and other departments and the type of PR activities conducted, etc. As to the PR activities the survey lists 11 items and asks if public relations department in the corporate headquarter conduct those activities. The items listed are: media relations; internal PR; investor relations (IR); advertising and publicity; crisis management; ko-cho (public hearing); cultural and social contribution; community relations; brand strategy; government relations, and; consumer relations including customer services (JISEA, 2006). The

survey asks if a respondent conducts a particular PR activity in their own department and reports the percentage of respondents that conduct the activity. The survey also asks what PR department outsources, but the items are limited to the actual works implemented such as writing press releases, setting up press conferences and production of reports. No inquiry is made as to the involvement of outside PR firms in consulting, advising, or delegation of all/part of PR function. JISEA survey answers the question, "what are the PR activities practiced in Japan?" However, it doesn't give us a clue to the question, "what are the PR activities practiced in Japan tomorrow?"

## Research Question

RQ: What are the types of PR activities that will be important in Japan in five years from today?

The JISEA survey asks what activities are handled by the PR department in the corporate headquarters. That a particular activity is handled by PR department does not mean that it is deemed important. In addition, looking at the current activities may not necessarily reflect changes in the environment that are actually taking place. Therefore, the decisions were made to ask importance of PR activities in the near future.

## Delphi Method

Delphi method is a method of eliciting and refining group judgments that have three features: anonymous response; iteration and controlled feedback, and; statistical group response (Dalkey, 1969). "The main criterion for Delphi's employment is the indispensability of judgmental information, which may arise in cases (such as forecasting) where no historical data exist, or when such data are inappropriate..." (Rowe, wright, & Bolger, 1991, p. 236). Delphi method has been applied to a wide variety of researches and researchers have developed variations of Delphi method. One such variation "in widespread use is the "ranking-type" Delphi, used to develop group consensus about the relative importance of issues" (Okoli, & Pawlowski, 2003, p. 16).

Delphi method is used by various public relations researchers. In 1980, McElreath conducted a Delphi study to identify priority research questions in public relations among 30 PR scholars and researchers in the U.S. (McElreath as cited in Synnott, & McKie, 1997). McElreath conducted a follow up study involving 50 panelists (1997). Synnott & McKie (1997) followed up McElreath, this time with 37 participants in 13 countries to establish international research agenda in public relations. Watson (2008) conducted a study that followed up Synnott a& McKie. In this study, the author's personal blog was used to pilot initial propositions. In the following rounds, 44 PR scholars and practitioners in six international regions were contacted. Boynton (2006) used Delphi method to identify key values that guide ethical practice of public relations. In this study, 83 PR practitioners contacted and 26 individuals responded.

## Method

For this study, Delphi method was used to elicit opinions of public relations scholars and practitioners in Japan on PR activities and seek group judgment among respondents as to the importance of these activities. Rather than soliciting opinions in the first round on activity items to be raked, they were provided by the researchers. This was to avoid listing of detailed activity

items that focus on technical aspect of PR, such as writing press releases, setting up press conferences, producing internal newsletter, and so on.

*Activity item*

Public relations activity items listed in the Q 2 of the JISEA PR department survey was referenced. The items were: media relations; internal PR; investor relations (IR); advertising and publicity; crisis management; ko-cho (public hearing); cultural and social contribution; community relations; brand strategy; government relations, and; consumer relations including customer services (JISEA 2006). Question items in the USC GAP study, III/G-1 (Swerling et al., 2007) was also referenced. USC GAP, question III/G-1 asks communications-related functions for which their departments have primary budgetary responsibility.

Since this was a study about Japanese PR practice, the JISEA survey was adopted as the basis for item selection and the USC GAP study supplemented the list. Both authors of this study have more than 10 years of experience in PR practice, one in corporate, the other in firm, before moving to academic environment. The authors relied on their own judgment to add items that were missing in the list compiled from the JISEA survey and USC GAP study.

Of the eleven items in the JISEA survey, community relations was changed to two separate items: domestic community relations and overseas community relations. This was to clarify the scope of international PR activities. From the USC GAP study, three items were adopted: web PR; issues management, and; corporate social responsibility. Four items in the USC GAP study - external web site, monitoring and participation in the blogosphere, monitoring and participation in online social networking, and monitoring and participation in other online media - were combined into the item - web PR - because the use of the Internet other than web site, such as blog, social networking site, and twitter etc, is not yet popular among corporations in Japan. For social responsibility, the phrase "environmental PR" was added because in Japan, environmental issue is of grave concern and many corporations take on the environmental issues as their corporate social responsibility matter. By adding the phrase "environmental PR" it was made clear that environmental issues are included in this item.

The authors added three more items to the list. They were: corporate intra-group PR; overseas PR, and; advising management. Corporate intra-group PR was added because even though zaibatsu conglomerates have lost much of the control it had, the authors felt that many major corporations have their own subsidiaries and pay much attention to maintaining corporate group identities. Overseas PR was added because business activities of Japanese corporations now expand globally, and many products exported were no longer "unbranded" products. The USC GAP study includes an item "executive communications," however, it can be for any of the activity item. For example, PR practitioners may need to support executive in media relations, investor relations, or government relations. The authors have decided to add an item, "advising management," because it can be a measure of the "seat at the table."

The activity items and their sources are listed in the table 1.

Table 1: PR activity items

| Activity item | Source | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | JISEA | USC GAP | Authors |
| Media relations | ⇐ | | |
| Internal PR | ⇐ | | |
| Investor relations | ⇐ | | |
| Corporate (& group) advertising | ⇐ | | |
| Product & service advertising | | | |
| Crisis management | ⇐ | | |
| Public hearing / information gathering | ⇐ | | |
| Cultural / social contribution activities | ⇐ | | |
| Community relations (domestic) | ⇐ | | |
| Community relations (overseas) | | | |
| Brand strategy (promotion & coordination of) | ⇐ | | |
| External affairs and government relations | ⇐ | | |
| Consumer relations (customer service etc) | ⇐ | | |
| Web PR | | ⇐ | |
| Issues management | | ⇐ | |
| Corporate social responsibility (environmental PR) | | ⇐ | |
| Corporate group PR | | | ⇐ |
| Overseas PR | | | ⇐ |
| Advising management | | | ⇐ |

*Participants*

The core participants were selected from the members of the Japan Society for Corporate Communication Studies (JSCCS). Members of JSCCS comprise of scholars and practitioners of public relations. Since the focus of the study was on corporate public relations activities, of the members of JSCCS, practitioners in government agencies, non-profit organizations, and academic institutions were excluded from the list. Those who were not in the list, but the authors knew and believed to be qualified, were added to the list. In total, 228 practitioners and scholars were identified as potential participants of the study.

*Step one - letter of invitation/first round questionnaire*

First, a letter of invitation and the first round questionnaire were sent to potential participants by email. Although it was assumed that members of JSCCS are experienced scholars and practitioners, it was stated in the letter that only those with five years or longer experience (practical and scholarly experience combined) were invited to participate in the study.

The first round questionnaire asked participants to rank order top 10 items from the 19 items list, in terms of its importance in five years. The participants also provided any additional item that they believed to be within the top 10 ranking. In addition, comment or rational for selection for each item, if any, were to be included in their response. Their affiliation, gender, and the length of experience in PR practice/academic research were also asked. Of the 228 potential participants who received the email, 43 responded. Of those 43 respondents, 38 provided valid response. The invalid responses were one of the three types: refused to rank order

the importance - for example, only grouped items in high/medium/low importance; rank ordered items with multiple items in certain ranks, or; did not rank up to ten items.

*Step two - second round questionnaire*

The result of the first round - the aggregate ranking of the items - along with their comments were sent to those who responded in the first round. The respondents were asked to rank order 15 items - 13 items ranked highest in the first round and two additional items proposed by respondents - and provide comments if any.

*Step three - third round questionnaire*

The result of the second round  - the aggregate ranking of the items - along with their comments are to be sent to those who responded in the first round. This time, they are not asked to rank order but to comment on the result of the two rounds. As of the time of presentation of this study, the third round questionnaires are not yet sent out.

*Rank order calculation*

To calculating rank order in Delphi studies, mean rank is used. Since the study asked respondents to rank-order 10 most important PR activity items from the list, not all items were ranked by the same number of people. In evaluating and reporting the rank, there can be two approaches. One approach is to report the ranking purely on the means of the rank assigned by the respondents. If the number of respondents who assigns a rank is too small, the item can be treated as outlier. However, there is no objective criteria for determining how many response is needed not to treat the item as outlier. Another approach is to assign certain score for items not ranked by participants. For this study, the researchers took this approach. Unlike projection of future technology, respondents - experts in PR - should be familiar with all these activity items. Therefore, that an item is not ranked does not mean the respondent is unfamiliar with the item. Rather, it is an indication that the respondent regards the item as less important than the item ranked as 10th most important. For this reason, in calculating ranks for this study, a value of 11 was assigned to all non-ranked items.

**First Round Result**

In the first round, 228 questionnaires were sent by email, and 43 responses were obtained (18.9% response rate). Of those 43, 36 were valid response (15.8%), ranking 10 items from one to 10 in order of importance without any duplication.

*Demographics*

Respondents' affiliation was classified as the following: PR firm; advertising firm; corporate; independent PR consultant; education/research, and; other. Advertising firm was included because many advertising firms in Japan offer public relations as part of their service portfolio and there are certain number of JSCCS members who are affiliated with advertising firms. Respondents were also asked of their gender and the number of years engaged in public relations practice/education/research (combined).

The demographic breakdown is shown in the table 1.

Table 1: Demographic (round 1)

| | | # of respondents (total 36) | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Affiliation | PR firm | 5 | 13.9% |
| | Ad firm | 5 | 13.9% |
| | Corporate | 10 | 27.8% |
| | Independent PR consultant | 6 | 16.7% |
| | Education /Research | 6 | 16.7% |
| | Other | 4 | 11.1% |
| Gender | Female | 6 | 16.7% |
| | Male | 30 | 83.3% |
| Experience | 5- 9 years | 10 | 27.8% |
| | 10-19 years | 13 | 36.1% |
| | 20-29 years | 11 | 30.6% |
| | 30-  years | 2 | 5.6% |

*Ranking (round 1)*

In the first round result, media relations topped the list, followed by crisis management. Top 13 items were ranked within 10th by more than half of the respondents, and the gap between the 13th rank item - consumer relations, and the 14th rank item - cultural / social contribution activities were fairly large both in terms of mean score and the frequency (1-10 rank). Two PR activity items were proposed by the respondents. The items were "word of mouth and social media strategy" and " corporate transformation." These two items and the top 13 ranked items were submitted for evaluation in the second round.

The ranking calculated from the first round response is shown in the table 2.

Table 2: Round 1 rank-order result

| Rank | PR Activity Item | Mean | Frequency 1-10 rank (max 36) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Media relations | 4.49 | 32 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2 | Crisis management | 5.97 | 27 |
| 3 | Promotion and integration of brand strategy | 6.56 | 25 |
| 4 | Web PR | 6.58 | 27 |
| 5 (tie) | Internal PR | 7.03 | 25 |
| 5 (tie) | Issues management | 7.03 | 23 |
| 7 | Public hearing / Information gathering | 7.17 | 26 |
| 8 | Advising management | 7.69 | 22 |
| 9 | PR on corporate social responsibility including environmental issues | 7.81 | 25 |
| 10 | Overseas PR | 7.83 | 20 |
| 11 | Investor relations | 8.00 | 20 |
| 12 | Corporate group PR | 8.19 | 19 |
| 13 | Consumer relations (customer service etc) | 8.61 | 20 |
| 14 | Cultural / social contribution activities | 9.67 | 11 |
| 15 | Product and service advertising | 9.94 | 7 |
| 16 | Community relations (overseas) | 10.36 | 8 |
| 17 (tie) | Community relations (domestic) | 10.39 | 9 |
| 17 (tie) | Corporate advertising (including corporate group ad) | 10.39 | 7 |
| 17 (tie) | External affairs and government relations | 10.39 | 6 |
| Proposal | Word of mouth and social media strategy | | |
| Proposal | Corporate transformation | | |

## Second Round Result

In the second round, questionnaires were sent by email to 43 people who responded in the first round, whether the response was valid or not. Thirty eight responses were obtained (88.4% response rate). They were all valid response, ranking 10 items from one to 10 in order of importance without any duplication.

*Demographics*

The demographic breakdown is shown in the table 3.

Table 3: Demographic (round 2)

| | | # of respondents (total 36) | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Affiliation | PR firm | 4 | 10.5% |
| | Ad firm | 5 | 13.2% |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Corporate | 13 | 34.2% |
| | Independent PR consultant | 6 | 15.8% |
| | Education /Research | 6 | 15.8% |
| | Other | 4 | 10.5% |
| Gender | Female | 4 | 10.5% |
| | Male | 34 | 89.5% |
| Experience | 5- 9 years | 12 | 31.6% |
| | 10-19 years | 11 | 28.9% |
| | 20-29 years | 12 | 31.6% |
| | 30-   years | 3 | 7.9% |

*Ranking (round 2)*

Of top ten items in the first round, nine items stayed in the top ten list in the second round. Most moves were minimal, with Web PR moving from the fourth to the fifth, and Overseas PR moving from 10th to the 11th. The biggest loser in the second round was the issues management, dropping from the fifth to the ninth with only one more respondent ranking within top 10. Two items proposed by the respondents did not gain enough support to be in the top 10 ranking.

The ranking calculated from the second round response is shown in the table 4.

Table 4: Round 2 rank-order result (round 1 result in the bracket)

| Rank | PR Activity Item | Mean rank | Frequency 1-10 rank: max 38 (round 1 max:36) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1   (1) | Media relations | 2.97 (4.49) | 38 (32) |
| 2   (2) | Crisis management | 4.24 (5.97) | 36 (27) |
| 3   (3) | Promotion and integration of brand strategy | 6.34 (6.56) | 28 (25) |
| 4   (5) | Internal PR | 6.50 (7.03) | 29 (25) |
| 5   (4) | Web PR | 6.68 (6.58) | 31 (27) |
| 6   (7) | Public hearing / Information gathering | 6.74 (7.17) | 32 (26) |
| 7   (8) | Advising management | 7.13 (7.69) | 30 (22) |
| 8   (9) | PR on corporate social responsibility including environmental issues | 7.50 (7.81) | 32 (25) |
| 9   (5) | Issues management | 7.53 (7.03) | 24 (23) |
| 10 (12) | Corporate group PR | 8.32 (8.19) | 21 (19) |
| 11 (10) | Overseas PR | 8.58 (7.83) | 23 |
| 12 (11) | Investor relations | 8.66 (8.00) | 24 |
| 13 (---) | Word of mouth and social media strategy | 9.63 (N/A) | 11 |
| 14 (---) | Corporate transformation | 9.71 (N/A) | 10 |
| 15 (13) | Consumer relations (customer service etc) | 9.82 (8.61) | 10 |

**Third Round**

Opinions of the respondents have fairly converged, as indicated in the fact that everyone agreed that media relations as the most important activity, and 36 out of 38 respondents agreeing that crisis management is the second most important. The authors have decided to ask respondents in the third round only their opinions on the outcome of the second round. However, since this is a research still in progress, the result of the third round cannot be reported here.

## Comments from Respondents

Along with rankings, respondents provided comments to PR activity items. In the first round, there were 236 comments. In the second round, there were 316 comments altogether. Some of the comments that the authors deemed important are listed here.

1. Media Relations
   - It is the fundamental operation of public relations.
   - Regardless of the diversification of media, media relations is the most important PR activity.
   - Although media will change in five years, it still will continue to be as influential as it is today.
   - The most effective message channel.
   - In five years, the concept of media and the way journalism functions will change.
   - There are increasing scrutiny of media content by citizens. Consequently, it will be more important that media relations activities are conducted in a fair and transparent manner.
2. Crisis management
   - As more and more companies are setting up departments specializing in risk management, the recognition of media relations professionals in times of crisis will rise.
   - Crisis management deals with survival of a company.
   - One incident can destroy reputation of a company in a single moment and companies must always be prepared.
   - The fundamentals of crisis management is the internal communication.
   - The most important skill in public relations.
3. Promotion and integration of brand strategies
   - Brand strategy will be more and more important as market continues to saturate.
   - In addition to conventional branding, "sustainable brand strategy" will be more important.
   - Every public relations activity leads to corporate brand strategy.
   - Mass advertising will continue to lose its influence and strong branding will emerge as a key theme.
4. Internal PR
   - The form of employment may change over time, but internal PR is important in maintaining the approach that "company = people."
   - For management in the future, internal "information sharing" will bear significance.
   - In the Internet age when controlling information is impossible, having employees understand and comply with corporate policies and codes of conduct will be ever more important.

- Employees and their families are important stakeholders of a company and internal PR helps maintain motivation.
5. Web PR
   - It has a strong influence over consumers but Web PR activities entail great risk and companies are not likely to expand beyond existing web sites.
   - As mass media is losing its reach, it will be important for several years from now.
   - Rather than information dissemination on the Web, information gathering, analysis, and responding to/of Web contents such as Web news and blogs will be more important.
   - Young people today don't read newspapers and the need for Web PR will increase.
6. Public hearing/information gathering
   - Fundamental function of PR.
   - It will be more important as social and international environment becomes more and more complex.
   - No information, no judgment. Often research prior to decision making is missing in PR. Enhancement of research in public relations is likely, but maybe not in five years.
   - Two way communication is the fundamental of PR, but the challenge is to determine what information we collect and how we collect them from abundance of information.
7. Advising management
   - In principle, public relations is a management matter and every PR activity is accompanied by a management decision.
   - The aim of PR activities is to 1) provide feedback from market and society for management strategy formation and corporate internal activities and 2) implement corporate communication based on management strategy. To do this, the close tie with management is essential.
   - The role top executives play in PR activities such as crisis management, corporate social responsibility, and brand strategy will expand. Top executive will play a leadership role in PR.
   - It is important for PR function to elevate its ability to bring to the management appropriate information timely. PR need to have presence in the minds of management.
8. Corporate social responsibility including environmental issues
   - In environmental issues and social issues, relationship building is more important than information dissemination. Therefore, it is more likely to be handled by specialists.
   - For large corporations to exist, corporate social responsibility and environmental PR are the essentials.
   - Corporate social responsibility will further become a common agenda and companies will be required to bear roles and responsibilities as global corporate citizens.
   - It is necessary to clarify which part of the company's business activity is socially meaningful.
9. Issues management
   - Issues management is essential in global business strategy.
   - It can be a part of crisis management.

- Japanese companies will need to conduct American style lobbying on social issues such as employment, economy, welfare, and securities.
- It will be important for the sustainability of businesses, but because the term is not yet recognized, and because PR departments are busy with day to day operations, not many companies can cover this area even if they recognize its importance.

10. Corporate group PR
- With mergers & acquisitions and industry reorganizations, various corporate groups will emerge. Today, the international competition is fought as groups. The enhancement of group branding covering both domestic and overseas operation will be essential.
- In corporate groups that span over different cultures, or that comprise of companies with different corporate cultures, smooth communication among employees and unification of opinion among them are prerequisites for its management.
- It is the same as internal PR, and there's no need to differentiate between the two.

11. Overseas PR
- Overseas PR should be handled not from overseas, but locally.
- Overseas PR will increase its importance as domestic market continues to shrink and overseas PR needs to be rooted in the locality.
- The significance of dichotomization such as "overseas vs. domestic," and "external vs. internal" is fading, but for Japanese companies in five years from now, cross-cultural communication remains to be an important issue.
- With the overseas sales ratio of manufacturing industries above 50%, enhancement of competitiveness overseas is inevitable. The importance of overseas PR to establish excellent global brand will increase.

12. Investor relations
- After the financial crisis, it has become difficult for many companies to foresee its performance. In terms of accountability, the investor relations' role will change.
- The scope of investor relations work may become broader than it is today. I am saying this with anticipation that current style of investor relations - only with printed materials and analysts meetings - will change.
- To cope with falling birthrate and aging population, and escalation of global competition, companies need to structurally change their business models. To achieve this, and to obtain funding for this, the understanding and support from shareholders and investors will be essential.
- With the number of individual shareholders increasing, the key factor in investor relations is whether the company can provide information that can fulfill management's accountability.

13. Word-of-mouth and social media strategy (additional item)
- Good consumer relations is the best word-of-mouth strategy.
- It will be more and more important as the Internet use grow.
- Whether it's a good or a bad, the rate at which a reputation travels constantly increases. Every company needs to devise a method to generate reputation. A reputation is not made merely upon information, and sincere behavior will be a key.

14. Corporate transformation

- Corporate transformation to accommodate changes in society requires utilization of information.
- Promotion of corporate transformation is a part of management strategy and is mainly handled by management strategy planning section. Once a strategy is formulated, PR section often plays the central role.
- For PR department to be recognized as a management strategy division, this is an important function.

15. Consumer relations (customer service etc)
- It will become important, not only to respond to inquiries from consumers, but also to listen to the voices and forward them to related sections in the company to improve customer satisfaction.
- This will be a key function in dealing with word-of-mouth.
- As consumers are more "right-conscious," mishandling customers can create a crisis. Legitimate claims should be handled sincerely, and bogus claims should be handled with a firm stand.

## Discussion

Media relations was unanimously supported by the respondents as the most important PR activity in Japan in the near future. Sriramesh and Takasaki (1999) reported that in a survey of 81 Japanese PR practitioners, media relations was highly valued by those practitioners. After 10 years, the importance of media relations in Japan remains the same and it is regarded as the most important and fundamental operation of PR.

Crisis management followed media relations. In the past decade, several well established companies have either collapsed or drastically down-sized its operation because of mishandling communication in crisis situations (for example, Wrigley, Ota, & Kikuchi, 2006). Its position in the ranking doesn't necessarily reflect the extent that it is practiced, but it can be said that the ranking reflects the understanding of the consequences of crisis and the importance of crisis management.

One activity item that deserve an attention is issues management. It is the only item that fell more than two spots in the second round from the first round result. It fell from the 5th in the first round to the 9th in the second round. It also had the smallest number of increase in the frequency- the number of people who ranked the item in the top 10. As one comment noted, the term is not yet well recognized in Japan. There may be a gap between those who understand the concept and those who do not. The concept needs to be translated into Japanese culture to gain understanding of this activity, and to expand the field of public relations.

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