

Expectations for Bloggers: Public Relations Executives’ and Bloggers’ Points of View

A study of the working relationship that exists between bloggers and public relations (PR) executives revealed a pairing in its earliest stages, replete with its share of misunderstandings and misperceptions, yet also with areas of similar beliefs and aspirations, according to new research conducted by APCO Worldwide and the Council of Public Relations Firms (CPRF).

This research study found common ground in areas such as the importance of transparency, as well as the overall impact and influence of blogs.

The most significant differences between PR professionals and bloggers appear to be related to the effectiveness in the ways in which some PR professionals reach out to bloggers and who should control the terms by which bloggers are compensated for their writing.

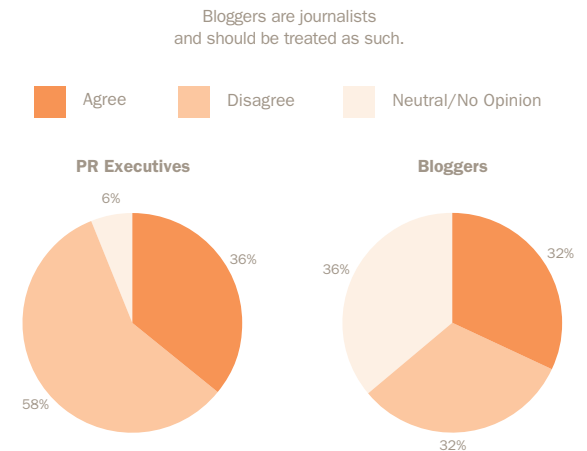
Like the blogosphere itself, this relationship is a work in progress, with the parameters and rules of engagement still being developed. It will require cooperation from both sides in order to build on whatever common ground currently exists and bridge those gaps identified in the research.

Blogger or Journalist: Differences in Definition

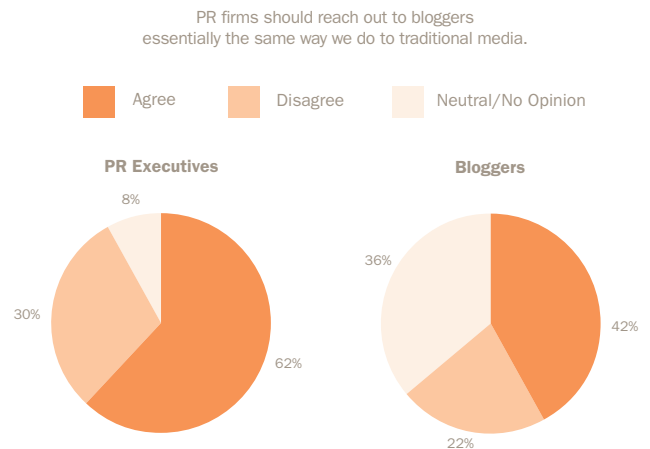
This somewhat new communication channel may have a name, but its particular role/distinction within the media spectrum, including its guidelines and rules, is still forming. This poses challenges for professional communicators who may want to apply the same methodologies used in “traditional” media relations to a medium not ready, or willing, to embrace the labels and attendant expectations.

PR executives and bloggers differ slightly on whether bloggers should be treated as journalists: 36 percent of PR executives agreed with the statement, “Bloggers are journalists and should be treated as such” versus 32 percent of bloggers who agreed with this

statement. While PR executives have firm opinions on this matter – 58 percent disagreed with the statement – about one-third of bloggers were neutral on this comparison/definition.

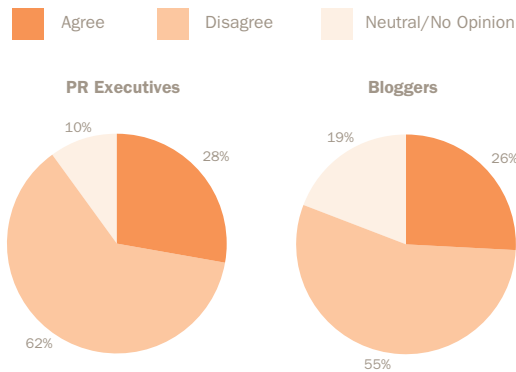


Conversely, a majority of PR executives agreed with the statement, “PR firms should reach out to bloggers essentially the same way we do to traditional media.” This appears to be a contradiction of opinion when compared with the question above. However, this may be attributed to the notion that PR practitioners tend to use common methodologies (related to advocacy and persuasion) when pitching bloggers and media alike. This is a question that would benefit from further study.



When it comes to specific tactics in reaching bloggers, a vast majority of PR professionals (62 percent) and bloggers (55 percent) both rejected the practice of “Inserting a press release in the body of an e-mail is an acceptable way to send information to a large group of bloggers.” This form of outreach, however, is considered common practice by some bloggers. Bloggers caution PR professionals that traditional outreach methods will not be effective with them; they are rightfully adamant that a smart, well-researched approach works best.

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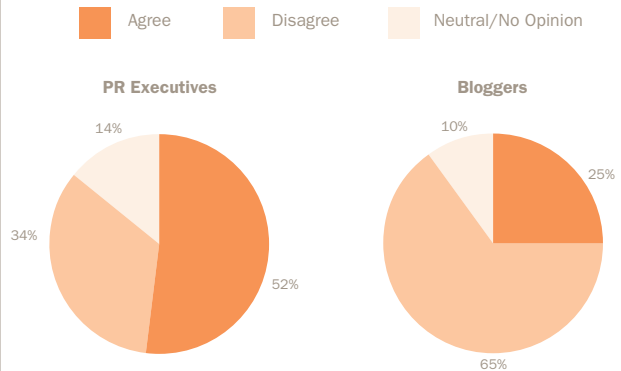
Most bloggers tend to write about subjects they are passionate about. And most of the time, the product is wholly owned by them. Therefore, their blog and the subject matter are extremely personal endeavors.

While “traditional media” and bloggers might prefer to receive their information/leads/content differently, this study demonstrated that thorough research of bloggers and what they write about, in addition to cultivating working relationships with them (much like PR professionals do with journalists), is still the best way to be an effective advocate.

While just over half of PR executives surveyed agreed with the statement, “Our firm does a good job identifying the specific interests of individual bloggers and sending them relevant information,” nearly two-thirds of bloggers disagreed. This difference in opinion should be carefully considered by the PR community and all other groups that are reaching out to blogs.

PR Firms: Our firm does a good job identifying the specific interests of individual bloggers and sending them relevant information.

Bloggers: PR firms do a good job identifying the specific interests of individual bloggers and sending them relevant information.



Navigating “Rules” of Engagement

The PR industry should strive to continually enhance the methods of communication with the blogger community and promote best practices. PR professionals who understand the blogger “culture,” its ethos and its nuances, are having more success in communicating their messages on this online channel than those who do not. In turn, bloggers who are engaging with savvy, well-informed communicators have richer material to share with their readers.

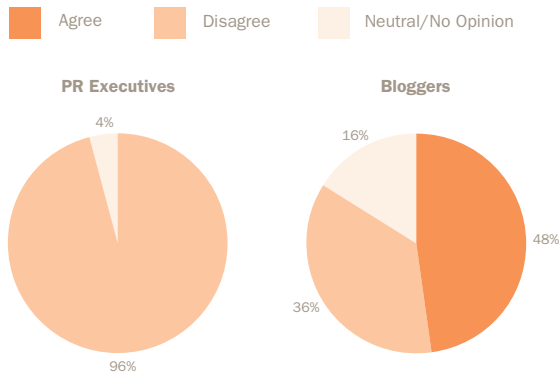
From the research, we learned that almost half (42 percent) the bloggers receive an e-mail pitch from a PR professional at least once a day (27 percent reported getting more than one a day). A majority (63 percent) were contacted by a PR professional at least once a week.

To date, it appears that these efforts have been fairly effective. Forty-two percent of respondents reported that they “write about something after being contacted” – at least sometimes – which, for the purposes of this study, was defined as “about half the time.” Another 42 percent reported writing “rarely” (about a quarter of the time) and another 15 percent said they never write in response to a pitch. These responses suggest the blogosphere is relatively fertile ground for PR professionals – particularly those who embrace its “rules” of engagement.

Disclosure of Compensation is Undefined Territory

PR executives demonstrated virtually unanimous disagreement with the statement, “It is okay to compensate bloggers for writing about my clients, but it is not up to me to tell them to disclose the payment.” A plurality of bloggers (48 percent), on the other hand, agreed with the statement and another 16 percent were either neutral or had no opinion. This issue also merits more investigation. These responses may reflect a disagreement over whether a PR professional can or should dictate the terms of disclosure; in other words, bloggers may be telling the PR industry that they alone are in charge of what is posted on a blog – or it may be a larger question of transparency.

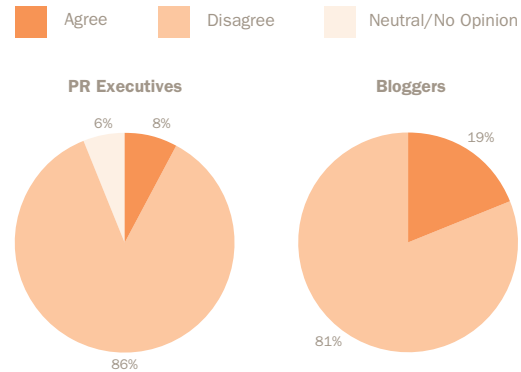
PR Firms: It is okay to compensate bloggers for writing about my clients, but it is not up to me to tell them to disclose payment.
 Bloggers: It is okay for PR firms to compensate bloggers for writing about their clients, but it is not up to the PR firm to tell the blogger to disclose the payment.



Alignment in Points of View

Transparency is paramount. Both PR professionals and bloggers alike insist on transparency in all communication/outreach between PR firms and bloggers. An overwhelming majority from each group disagreed with the statement, “There is no harm in leaving an anonymous comment on a blog on behalf of a client.”

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The CPRF developed a Statement of Principles in 2005 that focused on issues of transparency and disclosure. One of the principles states:

“We believe that our clients and the public are best served when third-party relationships with spokespeople, partners and allies are open and transparent.” This includes bloggers.

“Our bias in counseling clients is toward disclosure, which we believe is appropriate as a principle and effective as a communications tool. Third-party spokespersons, such as scientists; economists; scholars; celebrities; online media “influencers,” such as bloggers, or other third-party content experts who are involved in word-of-mouth communications, enrich the public discourse. Third-party organizations, such as alliances or coalitions, may be created to promote our clients’ interests. When a spokesperson, expert or organization is paid for participation, we will be transparent.”

Best Practices Based on Observations

Our research and continual discussions with bloggers have helped us develop five consensus points:

- 1. Don't get tripped up on nomenclature.** As bloggers have grown in prominence, much has been said about whether or not bloggers are journalists. But, the distinction is not really relevant; bloggers are critical discussion drivers, whether or not they call themselves journalists. The challenge is that the rules that typically govern the PR executive/reporter relationship do not exist in discussions with bloggers. PR professionals should assume that all forms of communication with bloggers, including e-mail, are considered "on the record."
- 2. Read the blogs you pitch.** One important thing bloggers and reporters have in common is that they demand relevance in communication. Just as beat reporters are not interested in hearing pitches outside their beat, bloggers want to make sure the materials they receive are relevant to the specific topics they are discussing. The best way to do this is to read the blog, pitch only stories for which the author is likely to have interest and demonstrate you are a frequent reader.
- 3. Relationships are key to success.** Not surprisingly, bloggers are more likely to respond to communication from people familiar to them. Online relationships are built through reading and commenting on blogs, participating in relevant social network groups, responding to specific items in discussions and e-mails beyond the strict pitch.
- 4. Work in real time.** The steps PR professionals take to engage bloggers and address their concerns should reflect the same urgency in which PR professionals address similar situations in the traditional media. Companies that work quickly to address criticisms or concerns can re-establish credibility with little or no long-term damage.
- 5. Transparency is non-negotiable.** PR professionals have rightly insisted on transparency from bloggers when disclosing financial arrangements. PR professionals must also be completely transparent about who they are, who they represent, what they want and what they offer. This is essential to credibility in the medium and represents the cultural standard.

About the Bloggers

APCO targeted a population of very well-read (and well-linked-to) bloggers. More than 90 percent spend at least 10 hours per week blogging, 59 percent spend more than 20 hours per week, 15 percent describe themselves as "full-time bloggers" and another 15 percent are full-time, stay-at-home parents. Interestingly, 15 percent work in the science or education fields, but not in information technology or software (6 percent). Even the most prolific bloggers are very busy with other responsibilities. These bloggers are also relatively experienced in the practice, given the nature of the medium. A majority (54 percent) of the respondents reported they started blogging three years ago or longer. Still, 30 percent reported blogging less than two years, demonstrating it is possible to build a very well-read blog relatively quickly.

About APCO Worldwide

Founded in 1984, APCO Worldwide is an independently owned global communication consultancy with offices in major cities throughout the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Clients include corporations, governments, industry associations and nonprofit organizations. Headquartered in Washington, D.C., APCO includes among its clients seven of the top 10 companies on *Fortune's* Global 500. Core services include corporate, investor and internal communication; crisis management; issue management; government relations; litigation communication; media relations; coalition building; opinion research; market entry; corporate responsibility; and online communication. APCO is a majority women-owned business.

About the Council of Public Relations Firms

The Council of Public Relations Firms is comprised of America's leading public relations firms. Its 100-plus members represent the premier global, mid-size, regional and specialty agencies across every discipline and practice area. The Council's mission is to increase awareness of the value of public relations firms in corporate strategy, business performance and social education, serving as an authoritative source of industry information, and to develop standards for the public relations industry. For more information about the Council of Public Relations Firms, call 1-877-PRFIRMS or visit www.prfirms.org.

About the Study

In early 2007, the CPRF included a series of questions about blogger outreach and standards of conduct in its periodic member survey. A total of 55 senior-level public relations professionals responded to the survey. APCO developed a list of top-tier bloggers based on industry-standard ranking tools, such as Technorati, and asked the bloggers the same questions. The questions were developed based on discussions that took place at a blogger and PR roundtable event hosted by APCO and CPRF at APCO's headquarters in Washington, D.C.



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