
German public relations

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Abstract

Public relations has a 150-year history in Germany, starting with promotional efforts in railroad and industry. The German Council for Public Relations, the country's major public relations organisation, was founded in 1958 in Cologne. Its recent survey found lots of misunderstanding regarding the role of public relations in German society. More than three out of four respondents think public relations is a form of journalism and about six out of 10 said public relations and advertising are the same.

Formal cultural customs are also followed in the public relations workplace. Meetings are punctual, last names are used, and office doors are usually closed.

Introduction

Germany has been known for decades as an industrial leader. Its many products have had sterling reputations throughout Europe and the world. They have earned a major competitive edge in international markets. Munich-based BMW, for example, is the global sales leader in the luxury-car market. The largest car manufacturer in Europe is Volkswagen AG, another German company. VW's Audi AG line is the world's third-largest luxury car maker.

The list, of course, could go on to include drug manufacturing (Bayer), electric devices (Braun), and earth-moving equipment (Bomag). Six million people visit Munich for its 16-day annual Oktoberfest, celebrating the country's world-famous beer. Germany, a country of 83 million people, is the largest exporter in the world and has Europe's largest economy. All of this quality production has created a marketplace in which German companies may sense that the necessity of public relations and advertising is not as crucial as it might be for other organisations

whose products and services may not be on a par with those in Deutschland.

Trust in their companies remains high for Germans, although it has suffered a slight decline compared with the previous year, according to the 2009 Edelman Trust Barometer (Edelman, 2009), its 10th annual worldwide survey of opinion leaders. It found that 73% of Germans trust their companies less than in 2008, compared with the global average of 62%. Yet, despite the economic crisis in 2009, German 'trust in businesses to do what is right' remained relatively steady, dropping from 35% to 33%, based on the Edelman study. Yet, "trust in government to do what is right" increased in Germany from 27% to 35%.

"The most trusted companies are headquartered in Sweden, Germany, and Canada. These three countries have held the 'most trusted spot' for the past three years of Trust Barometer surveys" (Edelman, 2009, p. 8).

Public relations experts in Germany would want to use these findings to help their clients and organisations deal with this loss of trust. Information from a CEO or government official has less credibility than in previous years. It hit a low of only 19% in Germany, according to the survey. Globally, outside experts are perceived to be the most trusted spokespersons for a company. An academic or industry expert was considered extremely or very credible by 59% of the respondents (Edelman, 2009, p. 13).

Deutsche Public Relations Gesellschaft (DPRG)

The German phrase for public relations is "Öffentlichkeitsarbeit," which means "public work" or "working in public with the public sphere and for the public sphere" (Verčič, Ruler, Bütschi, & Flodin, 2001, p. 376). One can see the application of that phrase with the global definition of public relations that

includes in the public interest. The German Council for Public Relations (DPRG) was founded on 8 December 1958, in Cologne. It created an ethics commission in 1988 and issued its code in 1991, which is binding on all members. Similar to other public relations bodies, the organisation (<http://www.dprg.de/statische/itemshowone.php4?id=140>) conducts conferences, workshops, contests, and networking opportunities for its membership. Within the past few years it instituted an optional accrediting exam for its members. Almost half of its members are employed as public relations counsellors. Unlike other professional organisations—such as the Public Relations Society of America or the International Association of Business Communicators—there are no student campus chapters of the DPRG yet to help groom the next generation of public relations professionals (although they can join DPRG). Underfunded German universities have been victims of protests as proof they too need quality public relations programmes for themselves.

“Thousands of less coddled students recently staged protests across Germany against their conditions. ‘Back education, not banks’, demanded protesters fed up with overcrowded lecture halls, crumbling campuses, tuition fees and a chaotic conversion from the traditional diploma to a European two-tier degree system” (The Economist, p. 57).

An online English-language PowerPoint (Luetzler, 2006) from DPRG’s Web site lists several activities of its membership. Under instruments of external public relations are:

- Oral communications
- Direct media relations
- Arranged media relations
- Print media
- Event management/communications
- Electronic media
- Political PR
- Sponsoring
- Other (product placements, surveys, give-aways)

Instruments of internal public relations are:

- Media transfer (employee publications, intranet, press clippings)

- Direct communications (meetings, corporate fitness, incentives)

The PowerPoint contained ‘PR Images in Deutschland’ conducted by the University of Leipzig. This undated survey does indicate some misunderstanding about the role of public relations in German society. For the statements, the general public agreed by the following percentages:

- PR is a form of journalism 77%
- Lobbying is a form of PR 66%
- PR and advertising are the same 59%
- PR and propaganda are the same 54%

The survey also asked the public about trust in occupations and institutions. The public relations profession was judged below average by the respondents. Ranked at the top on the one (no trust) to five (high trust) scale is the federal constitutional court at 4.0. It was the only one ranked four or higher on the five-point scale. Others above the three-level for trust were police (3.9), radio (3.7), newspapers (3.6), journalists (3.4), television (3.3), army (3.2), and Internet (3.1). Below the three-level were public relations consultants (2.8), church (2.8), trade unions (2.8), advertising experts (2.4), and political parties (2.4).

Training for public relations employees was typically handled by the DPRG in the 1960s and 1970s. Public relations courses were offered at several universities starting in the 1980s. A training and examination process was started in 1991, called Deutsche Akademie für Public Relations, or German Academy of Public Relations (Boatner, 2009). Several other private training institutes provide skills for public relations practitioners. No degree, certificate, or specialised training is required to enter the profession. Today about 20,000 individuals work in the public relations profession throughout the republic. Almost half of them are employed in departments within a company.

Germany celebrates a national Public Relations Day, although the date lately has varied from May to August. The annual event started back in 1966.

DPRG is synonymous with the voluntary self-regulating German Council for Public Relations. Three other organisations involved in its activities are the German Association of Political Consultants (DEGEPOL), the Federal Association of German Press Officers (BdP), and the Association of German public relations Agencies (GPRA), which consists of only the largest agencies in the country. As is attempted in most nations, these organisations self-regulate the profession to avoid governmental interference in their affairs.

All communication is vulnerable to dishonesty. Should the legislator intervene in such cases? In order to avoid state interference, two institutions were created in early post-war Germany to support the voluntary self-regulation of those working in the communication sector: the Press Council and the Advertising Council. The Public Relations Council, the last of the three larger institutions and founded as recently as 1987, deviated from this pattern. It was established because of the notoriously bad reputation of the public relations guild. However, today, even the Press Council claims the protection of the reputation of the press as an important reason for its existence (Avenarius, 2008).

The DPRG conducts ethical misconduct hearings quite unlike that of the US Public Relations Society of America. The latter only deals with its own members and has very little enforcement powers other than dismissal from the organisation. The DPRG, on the other hand, can censure not only members, but non-members as well as individuals not even employed within the public relations profession. Rather than holding meetings behind closed doors, it publicly announces and publicises its findings (Avenarius, 2007).

The German Public Relations Council encourages all public relations practitioners to adhere to ethical standards. It publishes and promotes the seven self-commitments of a public relations practitioner (Avenarius, 2008, p. 14):

1. By my work I serve the public interest. I am aware of the fact that I am not allowed to do

anything that might lead the public to wrong conclusions and to wrong behavior. I have to be honest and truthful.

2. With my work I serve my principal or employer. I commit myself to act as responsible advocate of his interests and to keep him from harm.

3. By my work I am involved in the activities of an organisation. I am faithful to the targets and the policy of the organisation which I represent, as long as these are in line with the dignity of man and his basic rights and the resulting laws and rights.

4. If I should work for an organisation which in communicating with the public fails to respect the dignity of men and fairness against other organisations, I will use my best endeavours to encourage them to correct this behaviour. If necessary, I will give back the assignment.

5. I will be honest and accurate in all communications to the best of my knowledge and belief. In communicating with journalists and other bodies assuming public responsibility I will not use any unfair means. I will not induce them to accept any kind of advantages.

6. I will respect the independence and freedom of my interlocutors. Therefore, I will not apply any instruments of power against them. Above all, I will refrain from any coercion.

7. I consider public relations work as a necessary assignment to create trust, public interest and to review one's own behavior. Therefore, I will not deliberately damage the reputation of my profession.

Public relations in practice

Public relations is not a new development within Germany, even though most scholars credit the United States with its modern development. "By 1890, Alfred Krupp's company had a 'news-bureau' composed of as many 20 staff members" (The German public relations business, 1987, p. 8). US practitioner and author Fraser Seitel maintains that the practice of public relations began in Germany much earlier than many thought.

"As in Canada, public relations developed more or less simultaneously in Europe and the United States during the 20th century. In

Germany, in particular, public relations writings appeared in the early 1900s.” (Seitel, 2007, p. 31)

Wilcox and Cameron (2009) added to this early history of German public relations in their widely used introductory textbook:

“Railroads and other large business enterprises began publicity efforts as far back as the mid-19th century. Alfred Krupp, who founded the Krupp Company, the premier industrial firm in Germany ... , wrote in 1866, ‘We think ... it is time that authoritative reports concerning factory matters, in accordance with the facts should be propagated on a regular basis through newspaper reports which serve an enlightened public’” (p. 43).

Aspects within German culture of being formal and serious also transfer to the workplace. Employees are hard-working and detailed. They prefer to follow agreed-upon guidelines exactly. Meetings and presentations are always punctual, unlike in many other global offices. There is a long and slow decision process that takes place. Information is not readily shared since most German companies are compartmentalised. Office doors are usually closed, unlike the practice in the US. Although Western traditions are slowly being adapted in some cases, first names are still infrequently used in the office. Co-workers are addressed formally and with titles. As is true in the US and other countries, women make up a majority of the employees within public relations. “In Germany, the number of women in public relations is currently at 53%” (Fröhlich, Peters, & Simmelbauer. 2005, p. 80).

A major study about gender stereotypes in German public relations agencies was conducted by Fröhlich and Peters (2007). The authors conducted extensive interviews with 13 females experienced in the public relations field. They determined that the field was becoming much more female-dominated. The researchers developed a new gender stereotype called “the PR bunny.”

Our study provides interesting findings for our understanding of women’s careers and problems in public relations by identifying ‘new’ gender stereotypes.

The existence of a ‘PR bunny’ stereotype among female public relations professionals shows a new devaluation of women’s soft skills by women and offers initial confirmation of Fröhlich’s (2004) model of the ‘friendliness trap,’ which argues that the stereotyping of women as ‘natural born communicators’ is being accompanied by a recoding process of female attributes as deficiencies in managerial tasks, professionalism, and public relations competence and, therefore, fundamentally threatens women’s ability to overcome the glass ceiling effect. Interesting enough, this recoding process is also applied by women when judging other women (p. 247).

Public relations practitioners have had some of their work eased when laws were passed allowing comparisons between competing products. Comparative advertising where one item was shown as inferior to another had been illegal. Discounts and longer shopping hours have also allowed more promotional work, especially amongst retailers. One of the recent major public relations efforts in Germany, also echoed in other countries, is encouraging tourism within Germany by its own citizens. Caused by the economic downturn, local holidays within the republic are increasingly being promoted as Germans eschew longer, more expensive trips to their normal destinations, such as southern Europe.

Americans who come to Germany to conduct public relations typically make other mistakes beyond just conversational misunderstandings of the language. Introductions are rather formal and titles are always important. Other cultural errors made by outsiders are being too informal (calling everyone by first names), speaking louder than necessary, dressing too casually, talking about World War II, and using product names that backfire. Sunbeam’s Mist-Stick was a failure, for example, when the American company discovered that mist in German was a word for dung. Although Germany places restrictions on speech or messages promoting Hitler or Nazis, it has a casual attitude toward nudity in the media and advertisements. In a seven-country

study regarding nudity of female models in primetime television commercials, German ads ranked as having the highest levels of nudity, along with Thailand (Nelson & Hye-Jin, 2008).

“In Germany, many business managers are still convinced that an excellent product sells itself” (Hinner, 2009, p. 45). Publicity shyness is still a factor in society. Hinner indicates this could be because of the strong regional differences that contributed to the concept of consensus and parity. Thus, a company might not wish to extol all of its virtues and stand out from the crowd. One example of this is this chapter’s US author’s consultancy with a four-star hotel. It was suggested that a big sign be erected on the back of a kiosk facing the river that the hotel fronts. Cruise boat passengers and motorists on the other side of the river could easily see the sign promoting the nearby hotel. But the German owner strenuously objected, saying it would be “tacky” to install such a sign, especially on a kiosk.

A recently retired marketing and advertising executive with 30 years of experience in the consumer goods industry agreed to be interviewed (anonymously) regarding public relations activities in the republic today (Hines, personal e-mails, June 22, 29, & 30, 2009).

Q: May I ask you about the practice of public relations in German companies?

A: First of all, I want to make sure we are talking about the same thing: public relations as defined as all efforts to let other people—such as journalists and opinion leaders—talk positively about your own company or products, and not about paid advertising.

Q: Do you think German companies are as publicity shy as they used to be?

A: Basically, yes, although there are improvements over the past 20 years. It depends on the size of the company. Big corporations are more open to public relations activities as mid-size or even small ones. Generally speaking, German companies would rather spend money in product or company advertising than in product or company PR. This may depend on the fact that advertising effects are better measurable, and that companies have almost always an advertising department, but not so often somebody who is responsible for PR.

Q: Do you think the attitude used to be, “If it’s a quality product, why promote it?”

A: No! This may only be the attitude of family-owned and family-run small specialised companies, or those that monopolise their markets or market segments. German companies know that it is not enough to be convinced about the first-class technical quality of their products to be successful. Therefore, the vast majority of German companies do heavily promote their products, but as mentioned before, they prefer advertising tools. Depending on what they produce and sell, they do TV, print, radio or billboards if they offer consumer products. Manufacturers of technical products attend fairs and distribute brochures, or advertise in specialised magazines. Germany is the export champion of the world. This is only achievable if you not only have excellent products, but also promote your products aggressively.

Q: Do you think the promotion picture has changed and in what ways?

A: Yes, this has changed over the past 30 years. But the change is much bigger in advertising spending than in public relations efforts. Public relations is even now the stepchild in marketing departments. If public relations is done, then it is company public relations—very rarely product public relations. There is one exception: If a company has a serious image or product problem (health-related or legal concern), then it discovers the value of public relations activities. Over the years, companies have learned to handle issues of this kind actively with the help of public relations tools.

Q: So that’s when public relations comes off the shelf to save the CEO’s or the company’s reputation?

A: You hit the point and made it clear and concise. Exactly. That is the behaviour in Germany. I always appreciate how Americans can express an issue in one sentence where Germans need a whole paragraph to say the same.

Media

Journalists and public relations employees are more closely aligned in Germany than in many other countries, especially the UK. A credible

public relations counsellor or firm is viewed as a valuable source of information by members of the media.

The traditional media landscape is changing as much in Germany as elsewhere. The news wire service German Press Agency (DPA) is losing revenue and clients as circulation and advertising income declines at member newspapers. The same is true for Agence France-Presse and the Associated Press, according to an article in the news magazine *Der Spiegel* (Brauck, Hülsen, & Müller, 2009).

Public relations writers send news releases to major print media regularly. German readership rates are amongst the highest in Western Europe. About three out of four Germans over age 14 regularly read newspapers, compared with about half in the United States. Almost all publications today also have an online edition, thus increasing the opportunities for public relations writers to place content in both print and online versions. The largest quality newspapers are the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Magazines are quite

popular throughout Germany. The weekly magazines hit newsstands on Mondays or Thursdays. About 6,000 trade journals and consumer magazines are published. The two best known ones are the news weekly *Der Spiegel* (the mirror) founded originally in 1946, and the illustrated weekly *Stern* (star), started in 1948. Major competitors include the monthly *Reader's Digest* (German edition), and weeklies *Bunte* (lifestyle) and *Focus* (news). Started in 1993, *Focus* was initially criticised for short articles and lots of colour (similar to the *USA Today* launch earlier in the US). (*Focus* magazine also created some publicity for itself when it tried to prevent Ford Motor Company from introducing its Ford Focus model into Germany. The magazine worried it could lose revenue by the confusion. A German court, fortunately, ruled that its citizens would not confuse the two.) Capital is one of many German business/financial magazines. *SUPERillu* started in 1990 in East Berlin and still focuses most content toward the former East Germany, where it is the highest-read magazine.



German newsstands are full of options. This section contains just a few of the specialised magazines for law, business, and politics.

Photo Courtesy of Hotel Günther. Boppard, Germany.

Journalists adhere to ethical standards and do not expect favours from public relations practitioners. The University of Leipzig-sponsored survey (mentioned above) determined that more than three out of four German respondents considered public relations a form of journalism. The two share many professional interests, but do follow ethical guidelines. Bribing media representatives for positive portrayal in their publications is much rarer in Germany than elsewhere around the globe. Based on a white paper from the Institute for Public Relations, 66 countries were ranked on the likelihood that journalists would accept gifts or cash in exchange for news coverage:

Bribery of the media, according to the study, is most likely to occur in China, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Bangladesh and Pakistan. By contrast, those countries with the best ratings for avoiding such practices are Finland (first place); Denmark, New Zealand and Switzerland (tied for second place). Germany, Iceland, and the United Kingdom tied for third place, followed by Norway. Austria, Canada, the Netherlands, Sweden, Belgium, and the United States had the fifth best rating (Kruckeberg, & Tsetsura. Institute for Public Relations White Paper. p. 1).

Germans have had mobile phones (originally called handies) for quite some time. In fact, there are more mobile phones than people in Germany. Consumers buy the latest gadgets, including iPods, BlackBerry phones, and iPhones. However, social media devices (blogs, Twitter, YouTube) were slightly slower in catching on. Still, based on a recent survey, Germany leads other Western European nations in using social networking tools. Ronna Porter, who works in Germany, wrote that the rate of adoption is 72% in Germany, compared with 59% in the UK.

While the reasons behind this must remain the subject for some future research, this result will surprise many—not the least of which is me. I have a foot in both camps as a British business communicator having lived

and worked for several years in Germany.

I say this not out of cynicism for the validity of the results, or a skepticism of this as potentially being one of Germany's many strengths—I just haven't experienced enough anecdotal examples of where I have seen this first hand to say, 'Yes, that makes sense,' despite lots of exposure to both markets (Porter, 2008, n.p.).

Television is still a major media source for most German citizens, who must pay an annual fee for each television set they own. As in other parts of Europe, German households have access to cable television. In many cases, public relations efforts are adopting more of an integrated marketing communications (IMC) approach. It enables an organisation to work cohesively so the identical message is reinforced by various factors within the company. So advertising, marketing, public relations, sales, and IT are all delivering the unified message to persuade targeted audiences. One such IMC campaign was called "Aktion Meditech," where more than a dozen German medical technology companies worked together to convince the public, governmental agencies, physicians, and patients about the value of advanced medical technologies (Schmitt & Beeres, 2006). It used such tools as news releases, newsletters, brochures, TV and radio spots, emails, reports, speakers, special events, interviews, websites, and dinners. It combines two-way communication in an advocacy role to influence behaviour or attitude change. The authors listed the lessons learned from the IMC campaign:

We would like to summarise the lessons we learned from our PRs, public affairs and political lobbying campaigns. Our key learnings are:

- It takes time to establish our key messages and to promote our technologies. We have to realise that public relations campaigns are a marathon, not a sprint.
- Associations, companies and stakeholders need to join forces!
- We need stories and tools that emotionalise.

- We need more patient stories, pictures, films.
- We need allies in communicating to a broad public.

To summarise it: Success takes patience and well-informed patients! (p. 208).

Another successful IMC branding project was conducted in 2006 by Weihenstephan, a major dairy company near Munich (<http://www.molkerei-weihenstephan.de/wanderfuehrer00.0.html>). F & H Porter Novelli, a full-service public relations firm in Munich, handled the successful multi-faceted campaign. Wanting to re-connect with its Bavarian roots, the dairy developed a hiking guide for that region's popular sport. The "Weihenstephan Hiking Guide" was released along with a famous Bavarian actor providing voiceover for a premier edition of the German hiking audio podcast. News releases were sent to various media outlets.

The 2006 "Weihenstephan Hiking Guide" and podcast were also available from the dairy's website. Copies of the guide were provided to Bavarian tourism offices, hotels and restaurants. Another aspect of the campaign was a raffle with more than 500 entries co-sponsored with a regional daily newspaper. The winners would receive a hike led by the popular Bavarian actor Elmar Wepper.

According to one study, almost three out of four Germans used the Internet during 2007, more than the European average. But the use of the Internet had not impacted traditional media usage. Most citizens still get brand information from their televisions (Quoc and Favier, 2008). Much progress in the use of social media will be a major agenda item for German public relations departments in the future.

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