

---

## Does gender matter?

---

**Graham White**

**Managing Director, Howorth, Sydney, Australia**

---

If I go back to university (mid-90s), when I was 26 years of age having already spent nine years working for a major telecommunications firm in England, did gender matter? To tell you the truth, it wasn't something I gave too much thought to. I chose public relations at Bournemouth University because it had a great reputation, good job prospects, and plenty of scope to grow.

It wasn't until I arrived on campus that I realised it was dominated by women. From a cohort of around 60 students, approximately 15 percent were male. We were outnumbered. Friends and family often joked that choosing public relations was a ploy to hang out with beautiful women. The stereotype was that public relations was just 'champagne, parties and thank you darlings!'

But would that be a reflection of the years ahead? Thankfully not. But it does really depend which sector you work in. I ended up in tech PR, which has an equal gender balance.

As I look back, has gender really played a role in how we get things done? Certainly, on average, it is an industry dominated by women. But that is circumstance. Perhaps, because of the stereotype, men just aren't that interested. But do women make better communicators? Are they more influential?

To consider these questions and gender in public relations, I got a selection of my male public relations colleagues to give it some thought. Each of them represents a different sector of public relations – technology, corporate, consumer, public affairs, pharmaceutical, and employee communications. This is what they had to say:

Working in public affairs and government relations of a large PR

agency offers me a unique perspective with regard to the interplay between gender and our most noble profession.

Drawn from the ranks of political operatives, spin doctors and industry and NGO lobbyists, the public affairs industry – across the board – has a fairly balanced gender split. Take my business for example. The gender split across our two offices resembles a Fibonacci sequence of 5:8 in favour of the men. Compare this to the rest of our floor and you will discover a drastically different story.

As a single male on the precipice between Gen Y and X (I am 30 so we'll call that Gen Y), I say, the more women the better. There are many men in the workforce, who might feel like they are disadvantaged by being the gender minority – I say they are disadvantaged by their own lack of creativity and strategic thought. Much the same as the teaching profession, men in PR have the ability to easily stand out from the pack and differentiate their own personal brand. This can only enhance one's career. In my opinion, there is nothing more attractive on this planet than a strong, smart and savvy woman. (A mid-level person from public affairs)

I'm in a lucky position. Most of my friends would kill to be in an office chock-full of young attractive women, but that's not why I'm so fortunate. In my agency, I'm glad of the opposite – that there is an equal gender divide, which in PR is a fairly rare thing.

I transitioned from one male-dominated industry (law) into a largely female-

dominated one (PR) at university. My class was 45-strong, with only five men other than myself. While my lawyer friends were jealous, it didn't make much of a difference until I actually started thinking about the mechanics of what it is we are paid to do. Comms and PR require not only an understanding of the media, but more importantly an understanding of the people on the street that those media are writing for. In my mind, that means an agency with a gender split of above 60-40 one way or the other will increasingly find it hard to accurately represent that audience. Not that individuals or groups of men or women aren't able to empathise with another sex, but it becomes more of a construct and a projection – and our insights are compromised.

I enjoy the fact I don't work in a boy's club, but equally have a strong male perspective alongside my own to draw on. Being a man in PR should be much the same as being a man anywhere else.

(A mid-level person from tech PR)

When you cross-cultures and gender, you get some interesting results. In the early 90s I relocated to California, working for a personal computer maker in Silicon Valley. The 30-person PR team was led by a woman and within that number there were a grand total of four men. I was the only Australian.

I was assigned a small team to work on my division's PR – all women until I secured the help of a male Regis McKenna consultant at a later time. Used to working in an Australian team I quickly learnt that the ground rules for team management in the US were vastly different to what I was used to. Our meetings were short, to the point and what I thought was business-like and efficient. I learnt that swearing to emphasise points was a no-no, as was

any acknowledgment that I was actually working with women. I couldn't say that my direct reports 'looked nice' in their business casual or business formal outfits because that would have been construed as sexism – or worse. Sports banter went nowhere and trying to get a language or culture that was more aggressively competitive within the larger team or even externally fell flat.

While initially welcomed into the team, I became conscious that one particular team member was distant and 'offish'. Why? I was never quite sure because when I tried to engage her directly to find out what was going on, it was shrugged off and never directly addressed, despite my efforts. Maybe I had been sexist? Maybe I did make an off-colour remark? Maybe I shouldn't have pushed her beyond her comfort zone? All sorts of things went through my mind, making me even more sensitive to the US male-female dynamic and ultra-political correctness.

Many months later during my review with my female manager I got some startling feedback. It wasn't that I was sexist or pushy; it turns out the issue was my "Australian-ness". I was too direct, too curt, too anxious to get things done right and way too decisive. It runs out what is a virtue in Australia turned out to be a vice in the US and it took me a while to adjust my management style to suit a culture that went out of its way to ensure everyone felt they were included in all decisions and major and minor projects. The team worked better although from my Australian perspective a lot of valuable time was wasted in what to me still appears to be a triumph of political correctness and staff 'feel good' management sentiments.

(A senior level person in tech and corporate PR)

In my younger years selling in entertainment stories as a male PR with

a gender-ambiguous name, I found that being a man was definitely a disadvantage with certain areas of the media. This was back in the days when we physically posted everything and followed up on the phone. I'd find journalists picking up the phone expecting to be chatted up by a young, female PR and being pretty overtly disappointed to find a man on the end of the phone, a moment of realisation which made the ensuing sell in a far steeper mountain to climb. I think also that the male competitive streak also made journalist relationships challenging – they often seemed unreceptive to another male having an opinion and knowledge in a field in which they believed themselves expert – a problem I never encountered with female journalists or observed in my female colleagues.

(A senior level person in consumer PR)

Almost two years ago I joined a PR company after spending the previous 35 or so years as a journalist. I am unsure whether my subsequent reception has been because of my age (59), my gender, my previous standing as an editor on a major metropolitan newspaper or, as I suspect, a combination of all three but I have found that clients have been willing to accept advice from me that (according to the people who engage me) they would be unwilling to accept from the mainly young, female PR operatives who work in our businesses.

I am also wheeled in as a 'straight shooter' type of 'grey hair' guy which seems to give me the ability to tell the ungilded truth rather than the sugar-coated truth that PR companies sometimes feel their clients will better accept. This applies both with normal client advice on media matters and with media training.

(A senior level person in corporate PR)

As you can see, some really interesting and diverse opinions, and all shaped by different experiences these people have had through their careers.

In particular, the final quote intrigues me. His belief that his gender (and age) gives him license to 'tell the truth', and get away with it. Does that mean young female public relations operatives, as he describes them, are unable to win client confidence? Would the same be true of a young male public relations operative? In my opinion, it would depend on the situation and the ability of those around the table to provide the senior counsel required. That is not about gender. That is about experience and craft.

If you put to one side what a person is wearing, how they speak, and all their non-verbal communication, the key in our profession is experience. It is also the ability to solve a communications problem and deliver a positive outcome. Your gender doesn't really matter.

Over the years, I have worked with some fabulous practitioners of both genders. People I respect and admire. People who think laterally, push boundaries, try new things and help our clients solve a problem.

This industry is about people. It is about influence and ideas. If you master the craft and fulfil the communications challenge it doesn't matter whether you're wearing four-inch stilettos or black brogues. At the end of the day you will be judged on your actions and results. That is how reputations are built. Your gender shouldn't come into it.

Writing as a 43 year old male, married with three children, I've spent the best part of 23 years working in a professional environment and 14 have been spent in public relations, both in England and from my current location in Sydney, Australia.

In those 14 years I have worked in two specialist public relations consultancies, both focused on technology, corporate and business to business; so, nothing too fluffy or frivolous, such as fashion, beauty or celebrity PR, which are dominated more by women. Perhaps my

perspectives would be different if I had chosen those fields.

The reality is that I have worked and studied with both genders. I've seen how things happen, how different genders conduct themselves, observed what they wear, how they behave, how they influence, how they respond under pressure, how they manipulate, and so the list goes on.

The reality is that people come in all shapes and sizes, each with different life experiences, different values and belief systems, different religious upbringings, and a diverse sense of fashion. I've seen both genders perform in all manner of situations in a professional public relations environment. But does gender really matter? Do men have an advantage over women? Where women seem to outnumber men, are men at a disadvantage? Do women turn on the charm to influence? Can men? Does what a person wear to work make a real difference? The answers to these questions will be different for everyone. In some cases it will be yes, and in others it will be no. An interesting topic and one that would make for a lively debate.

**Author contact details:**

[graham\\_white@ozemail.com.au](mailto:graham_white@ozemail.com.au)

**Copyright statement:**

The author retains copyright in this material, but has granted *PRism* a copyright license to permanently display the article online for free public viewing, and has granted the National Library of Australia a copyright licence to include *PRism* in the PANDORA Archive for permanent public access and online viewing. This copyright option does not grant readers the right to print, email, or otherwise reproduce the article, other than for whatever limited research or educational purposes are permitted in their country. Please contact the author named above if you require other uses.