

Guidelines for good science PR

The following guidelines have been developed for all those involved in institutional science communication. Science PR is one of various processes of interaction that make up institutional science communication. We understand “public relations” as the way in which institutions consciously shape their communication with internal and external dialogue partners. Science PR speaks for science in general but also for the institution that it represents.

Preamble

Science has an impact on a wide range of private and social life. It is one of the foundations of political, economic and personal developments and decisions. By furnishing new insights, technologies, procedures and ways of thinking about things, science changes society. At the same time it also systematically tests its own results, methods, and premises. Science is characterised by specialisation and ever increasing complexity. It is thus increasingly difficult for many people to evaluate its opportunities and risks and recognise its possible conflicts.

While some citizens feel disconnected from this process, others are developing a new critical attitude towards science. More and more people increasingly see themselves not only as its beneficiaries or recipients but also as participants in it. They want to have an influence. Social media provide them with effective tools for doing so. Whether it is in the form of blogs, discussion forums, citizens’ initiatives or citizen science projects. These also provide manifold sources of information – as well as partially contradictory results and conclusions.

Citizens can advance or hinder science, decide to place their trust in it or not. Thus, reliable information from and about the realm of science is becoming ever more important. Equally great is the responsibility borne by the various stakeholders involved in science communication. The framework conditions have changed, and not only due to developments within science and society. On account of dwindling resources, journalism is becoming less able to critically assess the reliability of information. At the same time, science PR has more

opportunities to reach citizens directly on the internet, through social media or through events and exhibitions. This increases expectations regarding the comprehensibility and quality of the information and services provided.

These dramatic changes call for a review, or reshaping, of current practices in science communication. The following guidelines were developed to account for that.

Good science PR

- strengthens awareness of and respect for the positions of **all** stakeholders involved. It opens up a vista onto science in its various disciplines and enhances understanding of scientists' working methods and perspectives.
- senses the questions, needs and sentiments (and possible fears and prejudices) of citizens and brings them into the science system and its decision-making bodies. It supports and promotes dialogue between science and society.
- works towards an understanding of the questions and needs of journalists within scientific institutions. It encourages scientists to engage with representatives of the media.
- aims to distil from the mass of available information what is relevant for society. The criteria for doing so must not be merely self-interest.
- sticks to the facts. It does not exaggerate when presenting research successes, nor does it trivialise or conceal risks. It avoids presenting information in a way that arouses baseless fears or hopes. It portrays research processes frankly and, when possible, provides open access to scientific sources. Good science PR fosters and coordinates dialogue about the opportunities and risks related to scientific methods and results.
- clarifies the limits of research claims and methods. It assesses the importance of specific information for science and society and contextualises it in the current state of research according to the standards of scientific integrity. Science PR names sources and contacts. It is transparent about stakeholder interests and financial relationships. It actively solicits this information from scientists.

- encourages scientists to speak about themselves, their motivations and their work. Citizens are interested in more than facts and information; they also want to know about scientific activity as a process and about the individuals involved in it.
- makes sure that information is processed and communicated to meet the needs of specific target groups. It utilises tools and channels suited to the particular task at hand and uses intelligible language.
- engages in self-reflection and self-criticism. It operates strategically and on the basis of defined values*, and it specifies standards for the quality of its own work, procedures and results. It assesses the efficacy of its efforts and avoids unnecessary or ineffective actions. It is transparent about its role and methods.
- is amenable to social changes and continuously adjusts its goals, strategies and actions on the basis of its values. Therefore, it seeks to exchange information and cooperate with others in the realm of science communication. It makes use of national and international discussions about practices and research in science PR for its own work. It promotes exchange and cooperation among institutions as well as dialogue with all parties involved.

These guidelines were developed by a cross-institutional working group organised by Wissenschaft im Dialog and the Bundesverband Hochschulkommunikation.

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* In our view, the basic values of science communication are:

- Truthfulness and credibility
- Benefit to society
- Transparency
- Openness on the part of scientists to engage in active dialogue with society
- Self-criticism and willingness to change
- Independence
- Willingness of all stakeholders to cooperate
- The principles of good scientific practice

Source: Siggenger Denkanstoß 2013
<http://www.wissenschaft-im-dialog.de/ueber-uns/siggenger-kreis/>