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Temas clave de las relaciones públicas en Europa: Resultados del European Communication Monitor 2007-2014

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Abstract

European Communication Monitor is the largest longitudinal research project in public relations practice in the world. Data collected annually from 2007 to 2014 show that practitioners perceive five issues as the most important for their work: linking business strategy and communication, coping with the digital evolution and social web, building and maintaining trust, dealing with the demand for more transparency and active audiences, and dealing with the speed and volume of information flow. Perception of the importance of various issues for the practice of public relations is largely dependent on the gender, geography (division between Northern and Western vs. Southern and Eastern Europe), and sector in which a practitioner works (corporate, government, NGO or agency). While gender and sectorial differences studied in academic public relations literature, divisions in public relations practice between North-Western and South-Eastern Europe are largely ignored.

Keywords: Public relations, corporate communication, communication management, European Communication Monitor, longitudinal research, issues

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Resumen

El European Communication Monitor es el mayor proyecto de investigación longitudinal sobre la profesión de relaciones públicas en el mundo. Los datos recolectados anualmente entre 2007 y 2014 muestran que los profesionales perciben cinco temas como los más importantes para su trabajo: conectar las estrategias empresariales con las de comunicación, lidiar con la evolución digital y la web social, construir y mantener la confianza, lidiar con la demanda de una mayor transparencia y unas audiencias cada vez más activas y arreglárselas con la velocidad y el volumen del flujo de información. La percepción de la importancia de los diversos *issues* o temas clave para la práctica de las relaciones públicas está relacionada con el género, la procedencia geográfica (división entre países de Europa del norte, oeste, sur y este), y el sector en el que trabajen los profesionales (empresas privadas, sector público, ONGs o agencias). Mientras que las diferencias por género y sectores se han estudiado en la literatura académica de las relaciones públicas, las divisiones en la práctica de las relaciones públicas entre norte-oeste y sur-este de Europa han sido ampliamente ignoradas.

Palabras clave: Relaciones públicas, comunicación corporativa, gestión de comunicación, European Communication Monitor, investigación longitudinal, asuntos clave

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1. INTRODUCTION

The practice of *modern public relations* (in all its denominations like *communication management*, *corporate communication*, etc.) is approximately one hundred years old, while its scientific study is much younger. Public relations as an applied communication science can be said to have been around thirty years. Although the progress of both the practice and the discipline is impressive in terms of growth of people and money employed, the number

of universities at which one can study and the quantity of academic publications, systematic empirical description, explanation and prediction in the field are rare. There are general overviews of public relations practice in Europe (van Ruler & Verčič, 2004a) and Asia (Sriramesh, 2004), and two editions presenting the situation around the world (Sriramesh and Verčič 2003a; 2009). Switzerland has reports on the practice from 2010, 2011, 2013 and 2014, with a clear intention of making reviews annual (Lurati & Mariconda, 2014), and the USA has biannual longitudinal reports since 2002 (Swerling, Thorson, Tenderich, Yang, Li, Gee & Savastano, 2014).

Comparative international research in public relations is still rare and mostly limited to studies of a couple or a small, mostly convenient sample of countries (e.g. Golob & Bartlett, 2007; Coombs, Holladay, Hasenauer & Signitzer, 1994); although theoretical models for it date back to 1990s (Verčič, Grunig & Grunig, 1996; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2001; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2003b; Wakefield, 2000 and 2011). Only in Europe we have academically rigorous and systematic longitudinal research in public relations practice starting in 1998 as a qualitative research project under the title of the *European Public Relations Body of Knowledge project* (*EBOK project;* van Ruler & Verčič, 2004b; 2008) and since 2007 as a quantitative empirical project called the *European Communication Monitor* (*ECM*) that annually surveys over 2,000 practitioners from over 40 countries – the last one was completed in 2014 and had 2,777 valid respondents from 42 European countries (Zerfass, Tench, Verčič, Verhoeven, & Moreno, 2014). *The European Communication Monitor* results enable us to empirically describe the practice of public relations and communication management in Europe and - enriched with theory - to derive and explain key issues in public relations in Europe.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Systematic research in public relations and communication management in Europe started in 1998 when the predecessor of the European Association for Public Relations Education and Research (EUPRERA), the CERP Education and Research, initiated the *European Public Relations Body of Knowledge project*. Although the underlying idea was to compile a pan-European bibliography of public relations and communication management publications, it developed into a qualitative project in public relations and communication management

practice in Europe. The project found that public relations is widely practiced across Europe, but not necessarily under that name, and identified four characteristics of European public relations: reflective (concerned with organizational values and standards), managerial (concerned with execution of the organizational mission and strategies), operational (concerned with execution of communication plans) and educational (concerned with communication competencies and behaviours of organisational members). Researchers noted a "diversified identity of public relations in European countries" and called their conceptualization "the jelly theory of public relations as a professional domain" (van Ruler, Verčič, Bütschi & Flodin, 2004: 55, see also Verčič, 2000; Verčič, van Ruler, Bütschi & Flodin, 2001; van Ruler & Verčič 2004b).

The European Public Relations Body of Knowledge project was in 2007 superseded by the *European Communication Monitor* (*ECM*), which became the largest and the most comprehensive annual survey of public relations and communication management in the world. Researchers from five European universities (Amsterdam University, The Netherlands, Leeds University, the UK, University of Leipzig, Germany, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, and University of Rey Juan Carlos in Madrid, Spain) work under the umbrella of the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA) in cooperation with the European Association of Communication Directors (EADC) and the Communication Director magazine (Zerfass, Moreno, Tench, Verčič & Verhoeven, 2013, 2009 and 2008; Zerfass, van Ruler, Rogojinaru, Verčič & Hamrefors, 2007; Zerfass, Tench, Verčič, Verhoeven & Moreno, 2014; Zerfass, Tench, Verhoeven, Verčič & Moreno, 2010; Zerfass, Verhoeven, Moreno, Verčič, 2011).

The empirical investigation into European public relations practice enables us to locate this report into "a practice-based theoretical conceptualization" turn proposed by Cornelissen and van Ruler (2006: 117): while the majority of theoretical work in public relations has so far been based on overall processes contextualizing public relations as a managerial practice, there is a need for practice-based research in public relations actual use and embodiment in organizations. For that reason we selected our research question based on self-perception and self-conceptualization of the ECM respondents:

RQ: What key issues European public relations practitioners perceive as the most important for their practice?

3. METHODOLOGY

The research framework consists of variables about the personal characteristics of the European public relations or communication professional, the structure and culture of his or her organization, their communication function, the current communicative situation of the organization and the perception of the most important trends, challenges and issues of the profession.

3.1. Procedure and sample

The ECM is the Internet-based survey in English language. It is launched every spring and is online for four weeks. Every year a personal invitation to fill out the questionnaire is send to over 20.000 communication practitioners throughout Europe via e-mail. The e-mail addresses are provided by the EACD. Furthermore invitations are sent via national branch organizations and networks. Between 2007 and 2014 16.310 respondents filled out the questionnaire, with an average of 2039 per year, increasing from 1087 in 2007 to 2777 in 2014. Since anonymity is guaranteed we don't know whether the same or different respondents filled out the survey. The samples are independent, the ECM research does not use a panel. Respondents are based in more than 40 European states. Most of the come from Western Europe (39.1% on average from countries like Benelux countries, Germany, France, Austria etc.), followed by Northern Europe (28.3% on average from countries like Scandinavian countries, United Kingdom, Ireland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania etc.), Southern Europe (22% on average from countries like Spain, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, Greece, Italy etc.) and Eastern Europe (10.3% on average from countries like Bulgaria, Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, Russia etc.). 55.2% of the respondents have more than 10 years of experience in the field, 56.3% of them are female and the average age is 40.9 years. Most respondents work for a joint stock company (27.7% on average), followed by agencies (27.2% on average), private companies (19% on average), government owned organizations (15.2% on average) and non-profit organizations. A vast majority of the respondents are heads of overall communication (46% on average) or heads of one discipline (29.2% on

average). Two thirds of the respondents hold a master's degree or higher (66% on average). See table 1 for an overview of the demographics of the total sample and the figures per year. The ECM sample is not representative for the population of public relations and communication professionals in Europe, since there are no indicators available about this population. It is therefore not possible to draw a representative sample. Given the characteristics of the respondents though, we think the results give a good picture of the state of the art of the public relations profession in Europe.

Table 1. *Sample European Communication Monitor 2007-2014*

Year Total/Average	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Number of respondents 16310	1087	1524	1863	1955	2209	2185	2710	2777
Number of European states 39	22	37	34	46	43	42	43	42
Gender (%)								
-Male (43.7)	-	45.2	49.3	44.5	44.4	42.4	42	38.3
-Female (56.3)	-	54.8	50.7	55.8	55.6	57.6	58	61.7
Average age 40.9	41.3	39.4	41.7	40.6	41.2	41.5	40.9	40.9
More than 10 years of experience (%) 54.4	48.9	45.3	58.3	52.1	56.7	57.7	58.3	57.7
European Region (%)								
-Northern Europe 28.3	31.8	22.2	31.1	28.8	27.9	29.6	26.2	29
-Western Europe 39.1	59.3	50.3	41.4	34.7	29.2	30.5	35.3	32.3
-Eastern Europe 10.3	2.9	11.0	8.5	11.3	10.5	10.7	14.1	13.5
-Southern Europe 22	4.9	15.9	19	25.2	32.4	29.2	24.5	25.2
Type of organization (%)								
-joint stock company 27.7	-	27.9	29.7	28.5	28	29.3	26.2	24.7
-private company 19	-	17.8	18.4	21.5	18.2	19.9	18.9	18.9
-government owned 15.2	-	12.1	12.7	16.9	14.1	16.4	16.3	18.4
-non-profit 11.8	-	9.5	11.5	11.6	10.9	12.8	13.4	13.2
-agency 27.2	-	32.6	27.8	21.6	28.8	21.6	25.2	24.7
Position (%)								
-head of communication/ agency 46	-	-	53.8	47.9	48.8	42.7	43.2	40
-responsible for single discipline 29.2	-	-	29.8	31.3	28.8	29	28.4	27.6

-team member/consultant 19.4	-	-	12.7	16.5	17.6	20.7	22.5	26.1
-other 5.6	-	-	3.7	4.4	5.7	7.5	5.9	6.3
Education (%)								
- doctorate 7	-	-	7.4	7.3	6.7	7.3	6.4	6.7
- master, diploma 59	-	-	60.2	59.3	58.8	57.6	59.9	60.8
- bachelor 26.8	-	-	25.1	26.9	27.8	27.6	26.5	26.6
- no academic degree 6.9	-	-	7.4	6.5	6.6	7.5	7.2	5.9

Note: – = variable not or not comparable included

Source: Authors' elaboration

3.2. Questions and analyses

In every survey of the monitor from 2007 to 2014 respondents were asked to indicate the most important strategic issues in the public relations profession from their point of view.

In this period the same question was repeated every year and was formulated as follows: Here are some issues that might become relevant for public relations and communication management within the next three years, please pick those three which are most important from your point of view.

Based on literature strategic issues were identified and included in the survey as answer categories since 2007. In 2012 a new list of issues was made based on the empirical results of the previous years and literature. The best scoring issues were kept on the list, the ones that were not picked often were deleted as an issue. See table 2 for an overview of the issues included as answer categories in the surveys over the years.

To analyze the dichotomous data first a descriptive overview was made of the mentioned issues per year (per year yes or no). Next the most important issues were analyzed to determine possible differences in the perception of these issues between male and female professionals, professionals in different European regions and professionals working for different types of organizations, using cross tables per issue per year.

Table 2. *Strategic issues included in the survey between 2008-2014*

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
1. Dealing with sustainable development and social responsibility	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
2. Coping with the digital evolution and the social web	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
3. Linking business strategy and communication	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
4. Supporting organizational change	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
5. Building and maintaining trust	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
6. Supporting intercultural integration	x	x	x	x	-	-	-	
7. Globalization of communication		x	x	x	x	-	-	-
8. Establishing new methods to evaluate communication	x	x	x	x	x	-	-	-
9. Developing CEO positioning and communication	x	x	x	x	-	-	-	
10. Advancing issues management and corporate foresight	-	x	x	x	x	-	-	
11. Dealing with the demand for more transparency and active audiences	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
12. Advancing public affairs and political communication	x	x	x	x	x	-	-	
13. Strengthening the role of the communications functions in supporting top management decision making	-	-	-	-	-	x	x	x
14. Stimulating and promoting innovations	x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
15. Integrating investors relations and public relations	x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
16. Redefining the relationship between marketing and corporate communications	-	-	-	-	-	x	-	
17. Matching the need to address more audiences and channels with limited resources	-	-	-	-	-	x	x	x
18. Developing organizational structures for coordinating communication activities across countries and stakeholders	-	-	-	-	-	x	-	-

Issue							
19. Expanding listening and monitoring capabilities, internally and externally	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	x
20. Enhancing international and intercultural communication	x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
21. Handling the challenges of data production, its storage and use	x		-	-	-	-	-	-
22. Interacting with new gatekeepers and audiences and responding to their communication needs	x		-	-	-	-	-	-
23. Positioning CEOs and top executives as leaders	-	x	-	-	-	-	-	-
24. Positioning organizations as leaders in their field	-	x	-	-	-	-	-	-
25. Dealing with the speed and volume of information flow	-	x	-	-	-	-	-	-

Note: Question is: Here are some issues that might become relevant for public relations and communication management within the next three years, please pick those three which are most important from your point of view. In 2007 the issue 'dealing with sustainable development and social responsibility' was phrased as 'dealing with environmental issues'. - = variable not included.

Source: Authors' elaboration

4. RESULTS

The data show five strategic issues that consistently are considered important by the public relations professionals between 2007 and 2014. The two most important ones are linking business strategy and communication (on average 45%, ranging from 43% to 47% in the separate years) and coping with the digital evolution and the social web (on average also 45%, with a range of 39% to 55% over the years). These two are immediately followed by building and maintaining trust (35% on average, with a range of 30% and 43% over the years) and dealing with the demand for more transparency and active audiences (31% on average, ranging from 28% to 36% over the years). In 2014 a new strategic issue related to this scored also a high 34%; dealing with the speed and volume of information flow. Summing up these five perceived most important issues it seems that the key strategic challenge for public relations professionals is how to link business to communication and to build and maintain trust for the business of the organization in a digital era where active audiences have their own social media, demand transparency and produce enormous volumes of information at high-speed.

The second most important group of issues (also above 30%) are matching the need to address more audiences and channels with limited resources (on average 33%, ranging

between 31% and 35%), followed by strengthening the role of the communications functions in supporting top management decision making (32% on average with a range of 29% and 34%) and dealing with sustainable development and social responsibility (on average 30%, ranging from 16% to 41%). Sustainable development and social responsibility has gradually lost its importance for public relations professionals, scoring high until 2011. Limited resources and supporting top management are since 2012 considered more important than corporate social responsibility.

A third group of issues has to do with a wide range of topics such as establishing new evaluation methods (20% on average)supporting organizational change (19% on average), interacting with new gatekeepers and audiences and responding to their communication needs (19% on average), globalization of communication (18% on average) and advancing public affairs and political communication (18% on average).

The rest of the issues all score lower than 16% on average and are of lesser importance to the European public relations professional. See table 3 for an overview of the scores of the different issues.

To find out whether there are differences between the perceived importance of the eight most important strategic issues overall, the answers of male and female professionals, professionals working in different European regions, in different types of organizations and with more or less experience in the profession were further analyzed using chi-square statistics.

Table 3. *Strategic issues as perceived by public relations professionals in Europe (%)*

	2007 (average)	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	Overall
1. Linking business strategy and communication	46	45	47	44	44	44	43	45	45
2. Coping with the digital evolution and the social web	49	39	45	54	55	46	42	32	45
3. Building and maintaining trust	43	30	35	33	30	32	38	39	35

Item									
4. Dealing with the demand for more transparency and active audiences	**36**	**29**	**31**	**33**	**35**	**23**	29	28	**31**
5. Dealing with the speed and volume of information flow	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	**34**	**34**
6. Matching the need to address more audiences and channels with limited resources	-	-	-	-	-	**34**	**35**	**31**	33
7. Strengthening the role of the communications functions in supporting top management decision making	-	-	-	-	-	**34**	**33**	29	32
8. Dealing with sustainable development and social responsibility	**31**	**41**	**38**	**37**	**37**	21	22	16	30
9. Supporting organizational change	23	17	20	21	19	22	26	22	21
10. Establishing new methods to evaluate communication	**31**	16	19	17	18	-	-	-	20
11. Interacting with new gatekeepers and audiences and responding to their communication needs	-	-	-	-	-	-	19	-	19
12. Globalization of communication		24	17	15	17	-	-	-	18
13. Stimulating and promoting innovations	18	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	18
14. Advancing public affairs and political communication	13	21	17	17	16	-	-	-	17
15. Redefining the relationship between marketing and corporate communications	-	-	-	-	-	16	-	-	16
16. Expanding listening and monitoring capabilities, internally and externally	-	-	-	-	-	15	-	-	15
17. Advancing issues management and corporate foresight	-	15	15	12	13	-	-	-	14
18. Positioning organizations as leaders in their field	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	14	14
19. Developing organizational structures for coordinating communication activities across countries and stakeholders	-	-	-	-	-	13	-	-	13
20. Developing CEO positioning and communication	-	10	11	11	10	-	-	-	11
21. Enhancing international and intercultural communication	-	-	-	-	-	-	11	11	

Issue							
22. Positioning CEOs and top executives as leaders	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
10 10							
23. Integrating investor relations and public relations	8	-	-	-	-	-	-
- 8							
24. Supporting intercultural integration	-	9	6	6	6	-	-
- 7							
25. Handling the challenges of data production, its storage and use	-	-	-	-	-	-	5
- 5							

Note. Top 5 issues per year are in boldface. - = not included.

Source: Authors' elaboration

Gender

In the first five years of measuring strategic issues male and female professionals agreed on the importance of almost all the strategic issues. The only one is the assessment of building trust in 2008, male professionals mentioned this significantly more as a strategic issue than female professionals. From 2012 onwards there are more significant differences, building trust returned as one of them in 2012 and 2014, still more male than female professionals find this a strategic issue. Also significantly more men than women think that linking business and communication is an issue in 2012 and 2014. More women than man keep finding that dealing with sustainability is an issue. Just like that in 2012 more women think that coping with the digital evolution and the social web is an issue and in 2013 that the demand for more transparency and the need to address more audiences and channels with limited resources is problematic. See table 4 for an overview.

Table 4. *Significant differences strategic issues gender*

Issue	Year	Male	Female	df	n	χ^2	sig.
Linking business strategy and communication	2012	48.7	40.8	1	2185	13.417	.001
	2014	47.4	43.3	1	2777	4.109	.05
Building and maintaining trust	2008	33.4	27,9	1	1524	5.355	.05
	2012	37.3	28.4	1	2185	19.575	.001
	2014	43.2	35.8	1	2777	15.111	.001
Dealing with the digital evolution and the social web	2012	42.4	49.2	1	2185	9.955	.01

Dealing with the demand for more transparency and active audiences .01	2013	20	25.5	1	2185	7.508
Matching the need to address more audiences and channels with limited resources .05	2013	27.9	32.5	1	2777	6.529
Dealing with sustainable development and social responsibility .001	2012	17	23.4	1	2185	13.018
.05	2013	17.8	21	1	2710	4.484
.001	2014	12.6	18.5	1	2777	16.861

Source: Authors' elaboration

Regional European differences

Over time dealing with the demand for more transparency and active audiences is consistently and significantly judged more important in Northern and Western Europe than in Southern and Eastern Europe. There are also differences along the same lines about the issue of coping with the digital evolution and the social web in 2009 and the issue of addressing more audiences and challenges with limited resources in 2012 and the issue of linking business strategy to communication in 2014.

It is the other way around for the issues of building and maintaining trust and dealing with sustainable development and social responsibility; in Southern and Eastern Europe those issues are considered significantly more important than in Northern and Western Europe, with the exception of 2007. This is remarkable since the overall assessment of the issue of sustainability and social responsibility decreased considerably after 2012.

Since 2014 professionals in Southern Europe perceive the issue of strengthening the role of the communications functions in supporting top management decision making as more important than their colleagues elsewhere. See table 5 for an overview of the significant differences.

Table 5. *Significant differences strategic issues European regions*

Issue sig.	Year	North	West	South	East	df	n	χ^2
Linking business strategy to Communications .01	2014	49.8	44.9	41,1	41,5	3	2777	13.124
Building and maintaining trust .05	2007	37.9	45.3	54.7	35.5	3	1075	8.763
.05	2009	32.6	33.8	37.3	43.7	3	1863	8.693
.01	2013	34	36.5	42.8	40.7	3	2710	13.535
Dealing with the digital evolution and the social web .05	2009	49.7	43.8	40	43	3	1863	8.639
Dealing with the demand for more transparency and active audiences .05	2008	34.8	28.3	24.3	25.7	3	1516	9.239
.001	2011	38.7	38.6	30.3	30.3	3	2209	16.615
.001	2012	26.9	26	18	20.9	3	2185	18.174
.001	2013	31.6	32.6	24.7	21.3	3	2710	25.338
.001	2014	34.2	29.2	24	23	2	2777	27.503
Matching the need to address more audiences and channels with limited resources .05	2012	37.3	33.5	32.9	27.4	3	2185	8.182
Dealing with sustainable development and social responsibility .001	2010	31.3	34.4	46.5	36.2	3	1955	28.949
.001	2011	29.7	35.7	42.3	45.5	3	2209	30.449
.001	2012	15.9	17	26.9	27.4	3	2185	25.923
.001	2013	14.8	18.3	24.7	23.4	3	2710	25.813
Strengthening the role of the communications functions in supporting top management decision making .01	2014	29.2	25.8	26.2	33.7	3	2777	13.528

Source: Authors' elaboration

Organization type

The assessment of the importance of many issues differ along the lines of types of organization. There are many significant differences between the perceptions of public relations professionals working in joint stock companies, private companies, government owned organizations, nonprofit organizations and professionals working in agencies. Linking

business strategy and communication is perceived significantly more important by people working in agencies, joint stock and private companies than those working in government and nonprofit organizations. The differences are consistent over time from 2008 until 2013. The same can be said from 2008 until 2012 of the perceived importance of the issue of dealing with sustainable development and social responsibility.

Coping with the digital evolution and the social web is an issue that is especially present for professionals in nonprofit organizations and agencies from 2008 until 2012, professionals working there assess this issue significantly higher than those working in other types of organizations, although this is an issue that concerns all public relations professionals. In 2013 and 2014 the differences ceased to exist.

The issue of dealing with the demand for more transparency and active audiences is more present in governmental and nonprofit organizations than in the commercial sector. The importance of the issue varies significantly between organization types from 2009 until today.

Matching the need to address more audiences and channels with limited resources is considered an important issue for all professionals but this problem is significantly more felt by professionals in nonprofit organizations than in other organizations in 2012 and 2013. Strengthening the role of the communication function in supporting decision making by top management is an upcoming issue since 2012. In 2013 this issue was significantly assessed more important by professionals in governmental organizations than in other organizations. See table 6 for an overview.

Table 6. *Significant differences strategic issues types of organizations*

Issue	χ^2	sig.	Year	JS	PR	GOV	NP	AG	df	n
Linking business strategy and communication			2008	49.4	51.5	32.4	35.2	46.5	4	1524
	25.704	.001								
			2009	51.4	52.3	36.7	36.4	48.9	4	1863
	28.464	.001								
			2010	45.4	48.6	37.6	35.8	45	4	1955
	15.726	.01								
			2011	45.6	48.8	34.9	37.1	46.3	4	2209
	20.804	.001								
			2012	46.1	46.3	36.9	41.1	46.7	4	2185
	11.843	.05								
			2013	42.8	48.6	33	40.5	45.7	4	2710
	27.451	.001								

Issue / statistic / p	Year	JS	PR	GOV	NP	AG	df	N
Dealing with the digital evolution and the social web	2008	31.5	32	33.5	44.8	48.1	4	1524
37.284 .001	2009	39.1	39.2	43.9	47.9	54.7	4	1863
32.914 .001	2010	48.5	49.8	50	58	64.9	4	1955
33.604 .001	2011	51.1	53.2	48.1	55	63	4	2209
26.539 .001	2012	46.1	43.1	42.7	46.1	52.4	4	2185
10.797 .05								
Dealing with the demand for more transparency and active audiences	2009	27.3	28.4	38	31.3	31.7	4	1863
10.066 .05	2010	29.1	31.2	38.2	38.1	33.6	4	1955
11.158 .05	2011	33.5	28.1	42	37.5	36.7	4	2209
17.177 .01	2012	18.4	18.7	34.1	27.5	23.9	4	2185
39.703 .001	2013	24.4	24.4	33.5	30.6	32.8	4	2710
22.210 .001	2014	23	26.5	34.2	28.3	31.1	4	2777
21.933 .001								
Matching the need to address more audiences and channels with limited resources	2012	33.3	32	33.2	47.9	28.1	4	2185
32.298 .001	2013	37.7	31.8	28.3	43.5	34.1	4	2710
25.229 .001								
Dealing with sustainable development and social responsibility	2008	46.1	40.4	33.5	33.1	42.9	4	1524
13.296 .05	2009	41.6	39.8	32.1	40.2	34.8	4	1863
9.679 .05	2010	44	39	25.8	31.9	36.0	4	1955
33.086 .001	2011	43	42	28.2	31.7	34.9	4	2209
38.254 .001	2012	22.7	23.7	17.3	16.1	20.5	4	2185
10.087 05								
Strengthening the role of the communications functions in supporting top management decision making	2013	29.6	33.8	40.5	28.1	32.1	4	2710
19.269 .01								

Note. JS = Joint stock company, PR = Private company, GOV = governmental organization, NP = Nonprofit organization, AG = Agency.

Source: Authors' elaboration

More or less experience

Professionals with more or less experience in public relations and communication management do not differ very much in their assessment of the issues for the profession. Since 2011 people with less experience consider the issue of linking business to communication significantly less important than professionals with more than 10 years of experience. In 2012 they were also less worried about building and maintaining but in 2014

they were only more worried about the need to address more audiences and channels with limited resources than their colleagues with more experience.

Table 7. *Significant differences strategic issues years of experience*

Issue	n	χ^2	sig.	Year	< 5 years	5-10 years	> 10 years	df
Linking business strategy and communication				2011	37.8	45.3	45	2
	2209	6.485	.05					
				2012	39.3	42.3	46.3	2
	2185	6.615	.05					
Building and maintaining trust				2012	28.7	29.7	34.3	2
	2185	6.055	.05					
Matching the need to address more audiences and channels with limited resources				2014	31.8	34.2	29	2
	2777	6.483	.05					

Source: Authors' elaboration

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Perception of the importance of various issues for the practice of public relations is largely dependent on the gender, geography (division between Northern and Western vs. Southern and Eastern Europe), and sector in which a practitioner works (corporate, government, NGO or agency).

Of the top five issues, three are highly studied in public relations literature: linking business strategy and communication directly relates to the notion of public relations as a strategic management function (Grunig, 2006; Verčič & Grunig, 2000), dealing with the demand for more transparency and active audiences (Grunig, 1992), and building and maintaining trust (Bentele, 2003; Grunig & Hon, 1999) are extensively studied in academic research. Research in coping with the digital evolution and social web (Verhoeven, Tench, Zerfass, Moreno & Verčič, 2012) and dealing with the speed and volume of information flow is still in its infancy.

Gender is recognized as an important moderator of public relations practice (Grunig, Hon & Toth, 2013), and so are differences between social sectors – corporate, governmental and non-for-profit non-governmental sectors are studied and compared. But divisions in public

relations practices between North-Western and South-Eastern Europe are largely understudied.

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