

# The Future of the Role of the PR Pro

Amid uncertainty, flexibility and innovation have emerged as enduring essentials. Purpose-driven communication and solid storytelling will become ever more crucial. And PR pros are working more closely with CEOs and senior leaders.

**SURVEY FINDINGS FROM RAGAN COMMUNICATIONS MAY 2020**



The COVID-19 crisis has drastically changed the landscape for communications and PR professionals. As brand managers are adjusting to a new normal of remote work, pivoted outreach and marketing, and careful reputation management, PR pros are adapting to become crucial advisors for business leaders.

To get a clearer picture of how the PR role has irrevocably changed in the first few months of 2020—due to the disruption caused by COVID-19 and other factors—we have fielded a survey to get a snapshot of how industry leaders see their future and what parts of the PR function are more important than ever.

We've asked 315 PR pros to weigh in from an array of organizations, including corporations (30%), PR agencies (28%), nonprofits (13%) and government entities (9%). Respondents work for organizations ranging from fewer than 100 employees to more than 10,000.

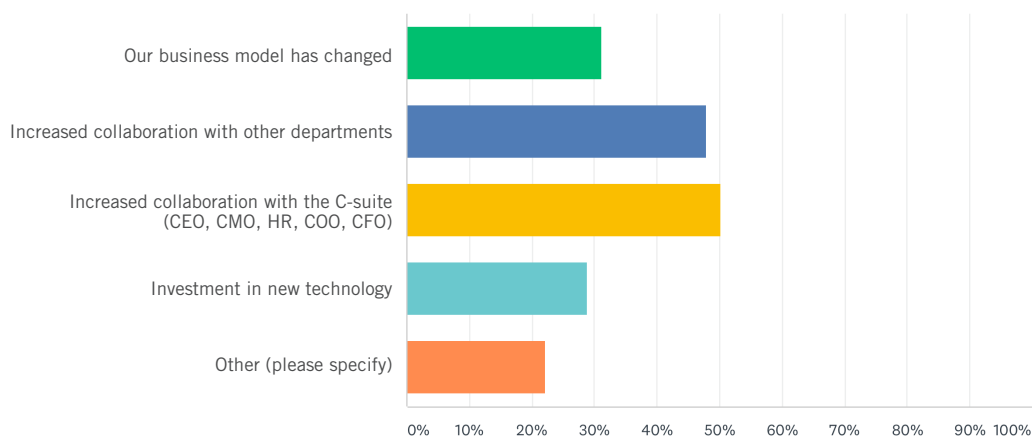
To what degree will the PR profession be permanently changed by the events of this spring? Here's what PR pros have to say:

### 1. CEO collaboration is the biggest change. Collaboration is a crucial asset in troubled times.

The No. 1 way PR agencies and departments have changed recently is increased collaboration with the top brass. At least half of respondents say collaboration with the C-suite (CEO, CHRO, CMO, CFO and COO) has increased. PR pros have always been connectors and coordinators for their clients and organizations, but during the current crisis, collaboration has seen a heavy increase. Forty-eight percent report more collaboration among departments in their organization.

Twenty-nine percent report an increased investment in technology, and 31% report that their business model has changed.

#### In what ways has your department/agency changed in the past month? (Select all that apply.)

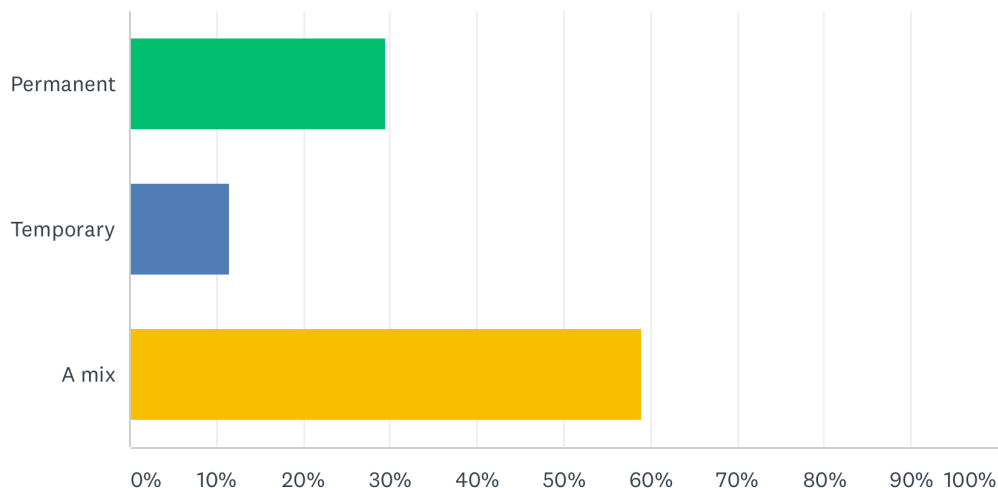


Others report more remote work, adjusted workflows, changes in services and fee structure, and a change in what their teams consider newsworthy. Some report difficult personnel changes amid layoffs and restructuring efforts. Comments range from “More frequent internal communications cadence” and “More emphasis on crisis communications and pivotal planning” to “Added substantial amount of pro bono hours for consideration” and “We’ve had to get creative. Doing some pivoting and refocusing of how we pitch media.”

## 2. Parts of the PR function will be permanently changed.

When asked whether the changes that PR pros have adopted during the COVID-19 crisis would become permanent, only 11% of respondents expect them to be temporary. Most respondents (59%) believe there will be a mix of permanent and temporary changes after the crisis.

### Of those changes, do you anticipate they're largely permanent or temporary?



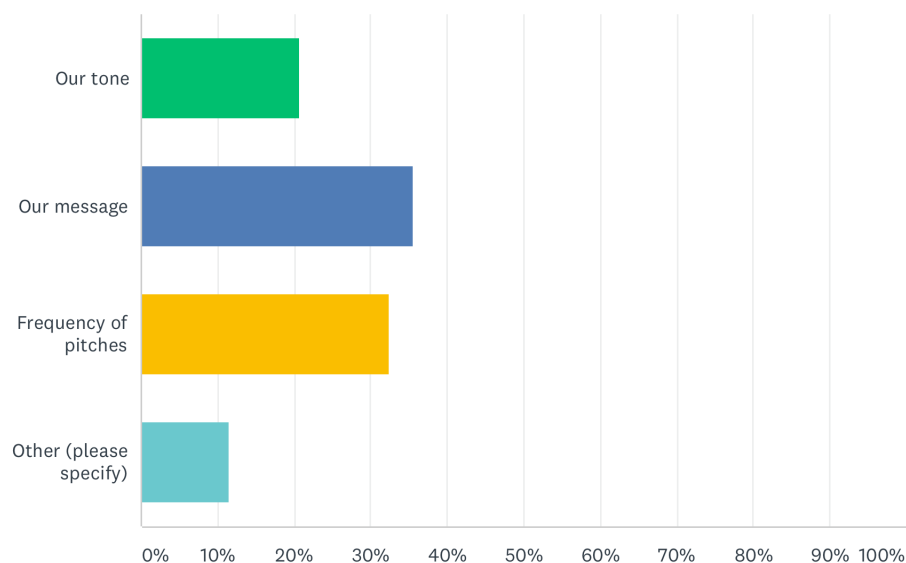
### 3. PR pros are flexible on how to adapt to the current media landscape.

Messaging changed the most in the past month. Asked how they have been pivoting their media outreach strategy, 36% say adjusting the message, 32% have changed the tone and 21% cite the frequency of pitches.

Some PR pros report their tactics have changed because they cannot pitch in person. Others say most projects that don't touch on the COVID-19 crisis have been relegated to the back burner. Some say they have stopped pitching altogether and are focusing on owned media.

Respondents say it's important to recognize the overwhelming amount of information out there, and some have taken action to decrease the number of messages they send. "Due to the volume of requests we started 'daily briefings' to our inbox subscription list," says one PR pro, adding the approach has been a success and has mitigated inbox volume.

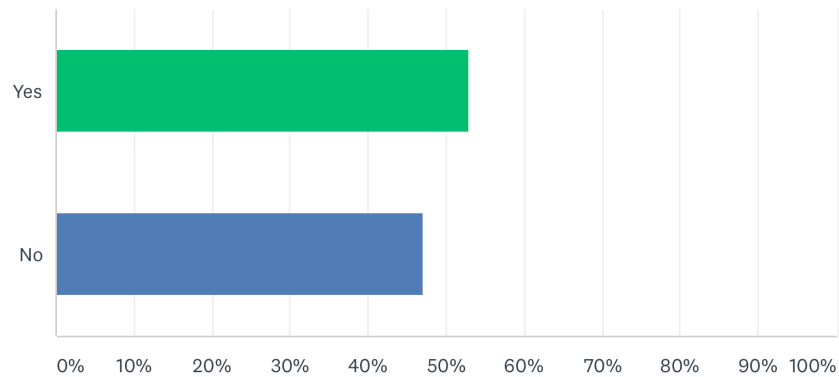
In terms of media relations outreach, what has changed the most in the past month?



## 4. More than half of PR pros are sending non-coronavirus-related pitches.

When asked if they are pitching stories to journalists without a specific COVID-19 hook, 53% of respondents say they are still pitching their clients and using non-virus angles.

### Have you pitched stories unrelated to coronavirus in the past month?

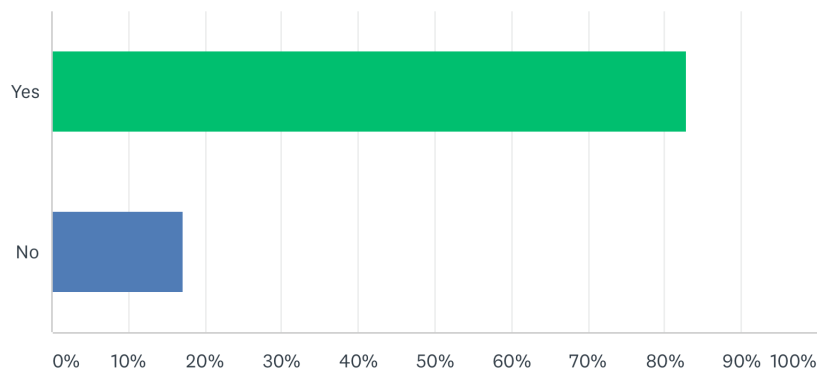


## 5. There is an appetite for non-COVID stories.

For PR pros who say they have been pitching non-coronavirus angles, 83% say they have gotten media placements through their efforts.

There is still a risk that you will strike out, but there seems to be a lane for PR pros who know how to manage their messaging to get earned media.

### Have you gotten media placements?



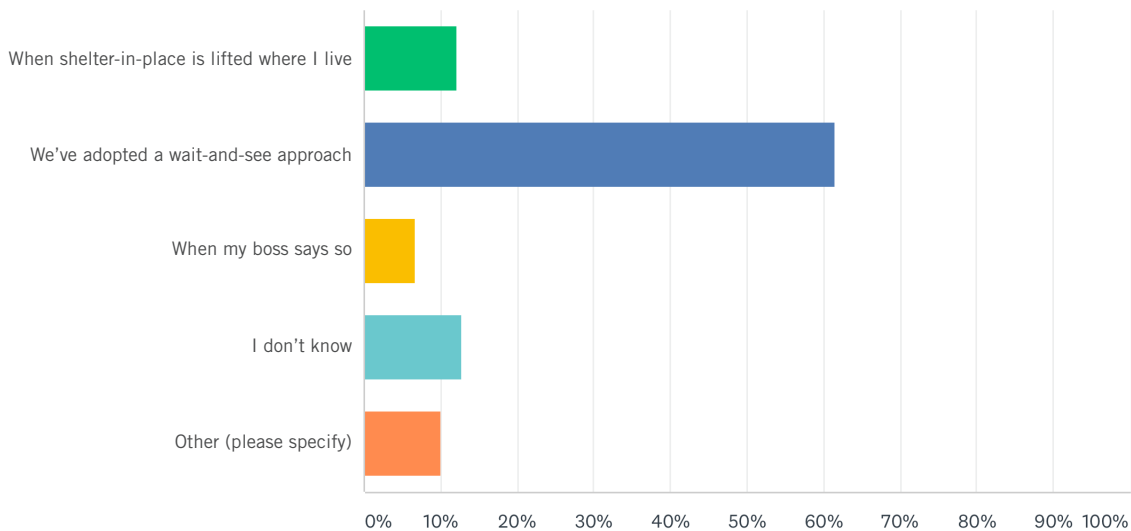
## 6. For PR pros who aren't pitching, a "return to normal" plan remains elusive.

There aren't a lot of firm answers for when a more normal media landscape will emerge, so many PR pros are adopting a "wait-and-see" approach as they prepare for a more robust recovery.

Of those who have stopped pitching non-coronavirus stories, more than half (61%) say they are keeping a watchful eye. Others have placed significance on external signals such as the lifting of shelter-in-place orders (12%) or a directive from a boss (7%). A sizable 13% shrug their shoulders and admit they don't know.

Respondents also say they are waiting on the green light from clients or media outlets to be more receptive, and some say they are just waiting for the right story that won't seem tone-deaf.

### When will you resume pitching non-coronavirus-related stories?



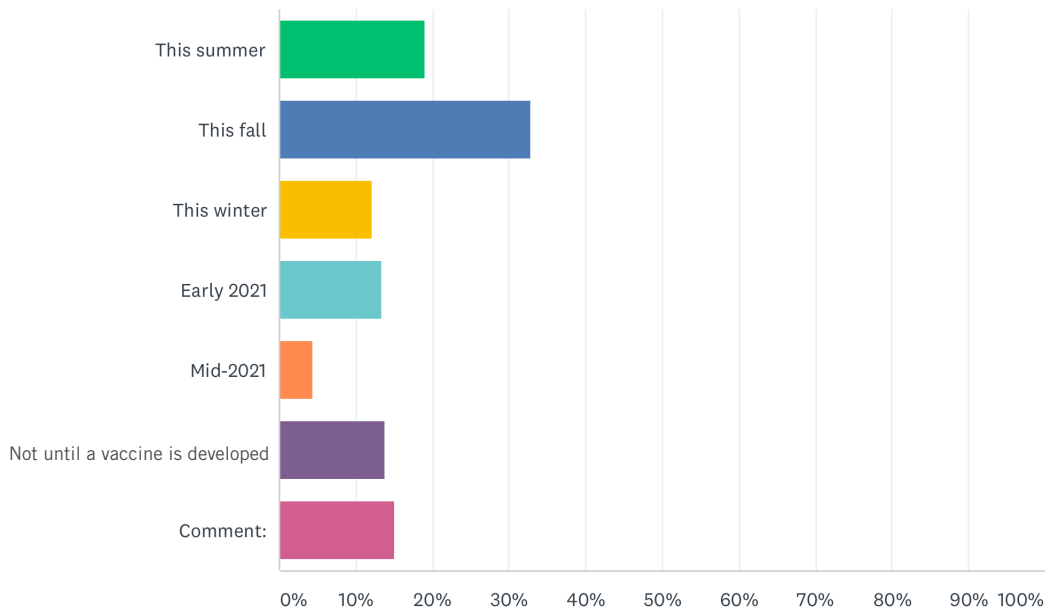
## 7. When it comes to a “return to normal,” many PR pros are eyeing the fall of 2020.

There was a wide range in expected outcomes from PR pros asked to predict when “normal” PR outreach will resume. One in five (19%) say PR activities could resume as early as this summer.

However, the highest rate of response favors the autumn, with 33% saying they expect a “return to normal” this fall. Fourteen percent say not until a vaccine is developed, 13% predict early 2021, 12% this winter, and 4% say not until mid-2021.

Many respondents indicate a lack of certainty. “It won’t return to normal—there will be a new PR landscape,” says one PR pro, and others offer variations of doubt and hedging. It’s “Unpredictable at this stage” and “Reporters and producers I’m dealing with are eager for non-virus news but they have limited space to place it due to COVID-19 surge situation.”

### How quickly do you anticipate returning to “normal” in terms of PR outreach?

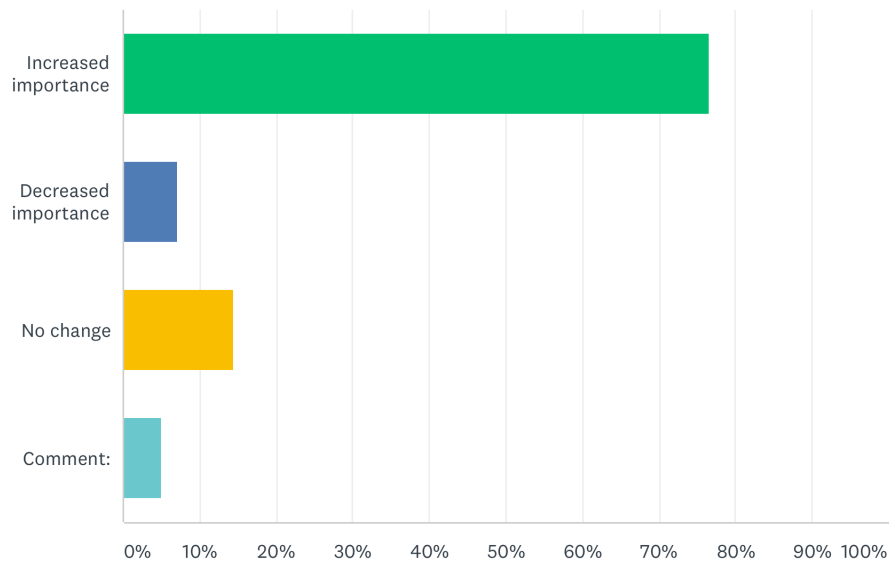


## 8. PR's value has never been more important for the organization.

When asked how PR's value has changed because of the pandemic, most respondents (77%) say they see increased value for the PR role.

Only 7% say they have seen a decrease in importance, and 14% say there has been no change.

### Describe the value PR will have on your organization/clients this year.



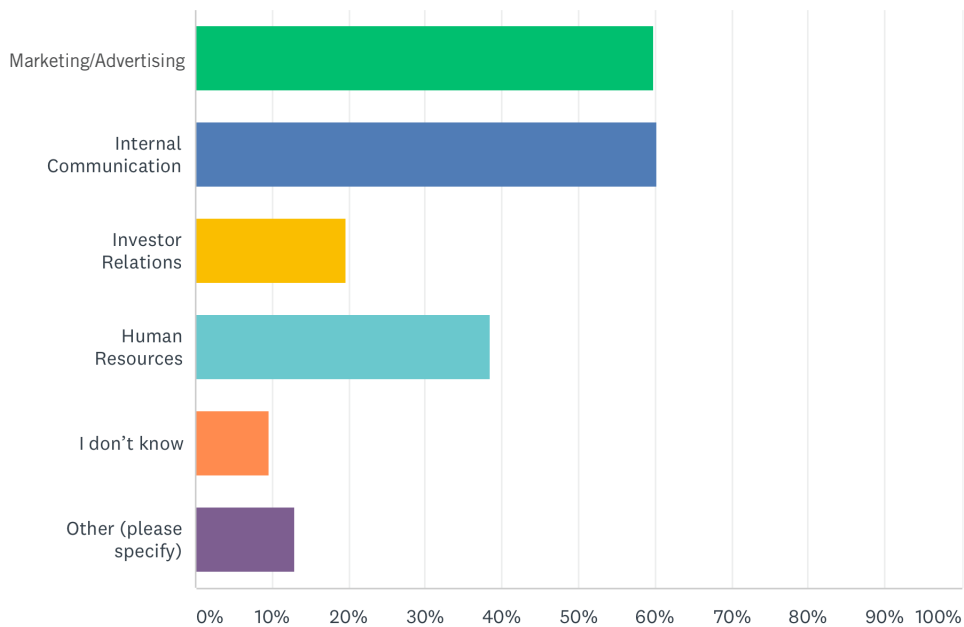


## 9. PR pros should get cozy with their internal comms, marketing and HR colleagues.

PR pros expect to work more with other departments some of which aren't surprising—marketing, for example—but others might raise an eyebrow, such as HR.

Sixty percent expect internal communications and marketing/advertising teams will be key allies in the future, in addition to human resources (38%) and investor relations (20%). Others mention social media departments, donor relations for nonprofits, and digital and IT departments.

### Which departments will PR be more aligned with in the future? (Select all that apply.)

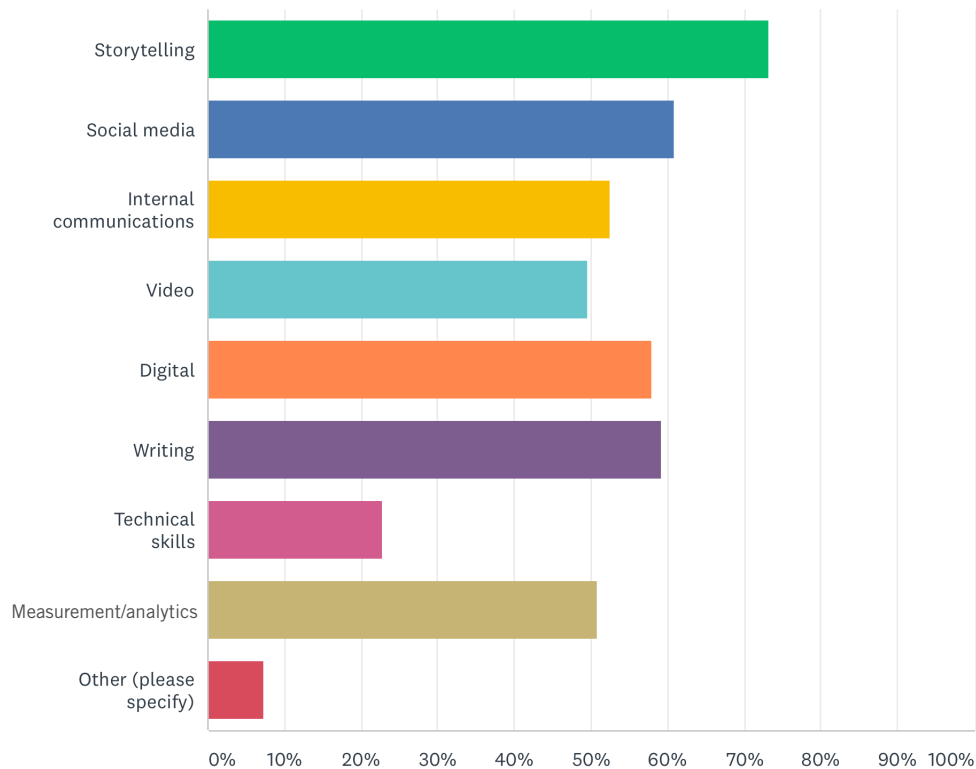


## 10. Storytelling is a top PR skill set.

To our question about which skills will be most important for future PR pros, the No. 1 answer by a healthy margin is storytelling (73%). There is no replacing the value of a good story. Social media and writing place second and third, with 61% and 59% respectively. Digital skills and knowhow pull in 58%.

Other top skills include internal communications (53%), measurement and analytics (51%) and video production (50%).

### What skill sets will be most important in a PR pro moving forward? (Select all that apply)



## 11. Pros put a premium on flexibility and creativity.

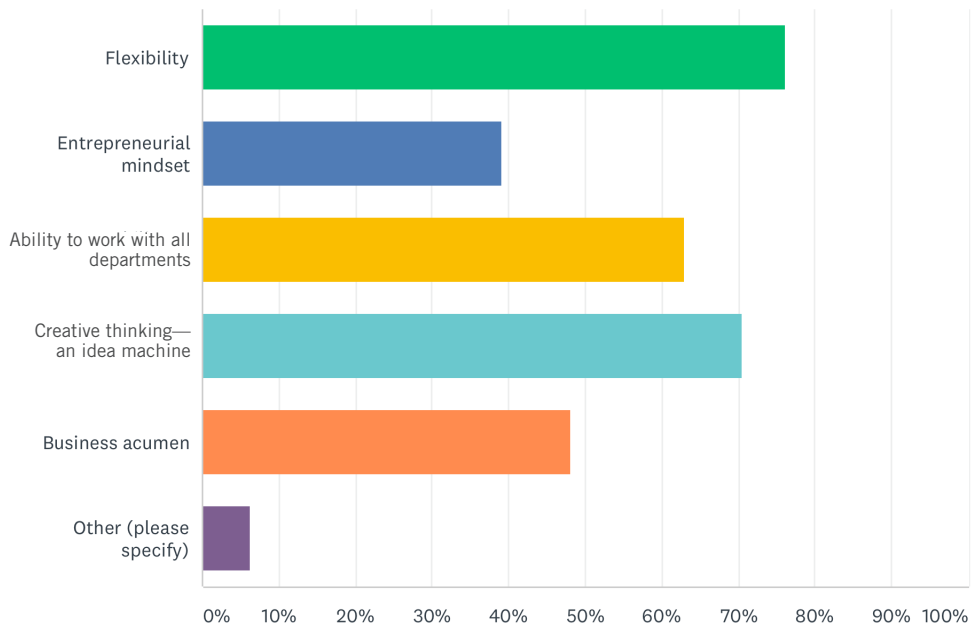
The tandem abilities of adaptability and innovation top the wish list for PR pros when they think about bringing in new team members or selecting collaborators for future PR work.

With 76% saying flexibility will be a top trait for future PR pros and 71% pointing to creative thinking skills, PR pros would be well advised to develop their soft skills to further their careers. Ranking third is the ability to work with other departments, at 63%.

However, some PR pros might find a competitive advantage by focusing on business acumen (48%) and an entrepreneurial mindset (39%), despite their lower rankings by respondents.

Other responses include the ability to “think globally,” resiliency, empathy, story-mining skills and more.

### What attributes will be most important in a PR pro moving forward? (Select all that apply)

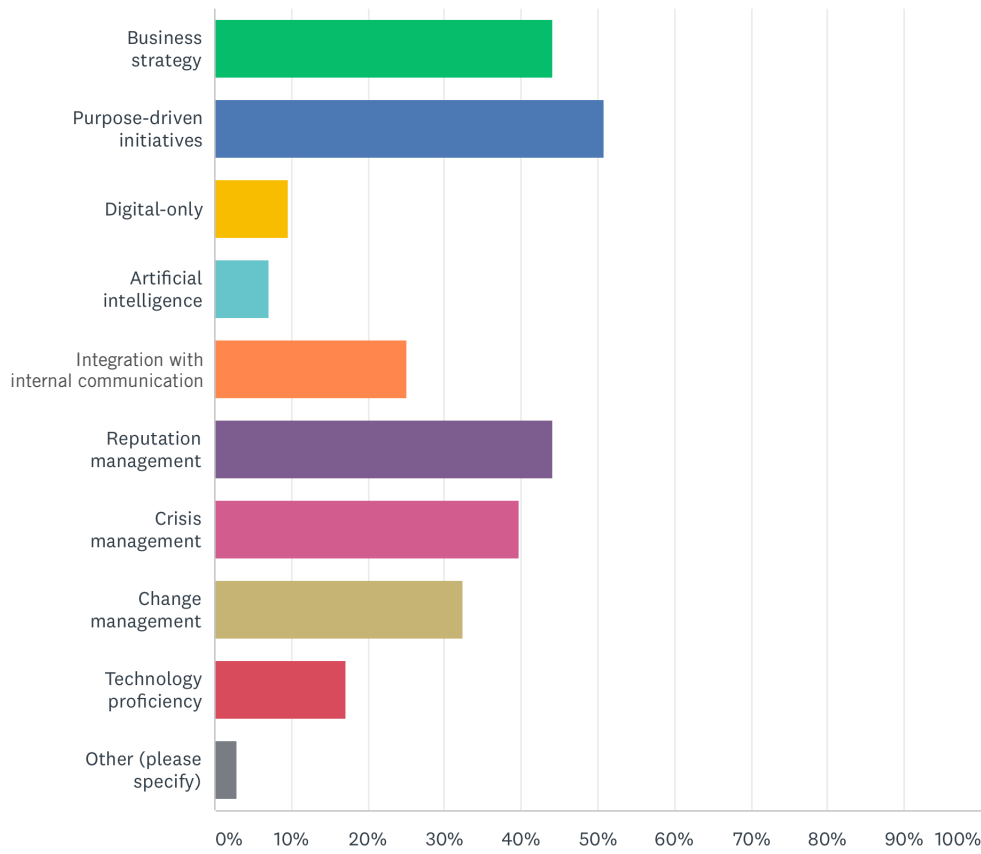


## 12. The future of the industry will focus on purpose, business strategy, crisis management and reputation.

In pinpointing what will define the future of the PR role, respondents key on purpose-driven initiatives (51%), business strategy (44%), reputation management (44%), crisis management (40%) and change management (32%).

Fewer respondents lean toward a digital-only approach (10%) and artificial intelligence (7%).

### Where do you see the focus of the PR profession in the next 2-3 years? (Choose the top three)



### Conclusions

For PR pros with their eyes on the future, soft skills such as collaboration and flexibility will be crucial, as practitioners adapt to a highly volatile media landscape. Even PR pros who are willing to set rough timelines for the end of the COVID-19 cycle are hedging heavily on the lack of marketplace certainty.

However, savvy PR pros say there are opportunities for telling stories unrelated to the crisis, but those offering pitches should take care to adjust their message, tone and outreach frequency.

For practitioners taking a wait-and-see approach, careful monitoring in the months to come will be essential. Working closely with your colleagues in internal communications, HR and marketing will be crucial in helping you source your greatest weapon in finding earned media coverage: a great story.

For PR pros taking the long view on their profession, crisis reputation and management will be an ever-growing part of your function. The skills that will help you perform to the best of your ability? Flexibility, creativity, business acumen and a collaborative spirit.

For PR pros who can rise to the challenge, the future looks bright.

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For more than five decades, Lawrence Ragan Communications, Inc., has been a leader in training for professionals in corporate communications, public relations, social media and management. Ever since the launch of “The Ragan Report” in 1970, Ragan has provided communicators and executives with timely, practical and relevant information that few others can match. Ragan is rooted in helping the communications professional advance in their careers while also improving the voice of the organizations they serve. The Ragan brand includes highly curated live and virtual events, two leadership Councils, multiple websites, an awards division, a consulting arm and targeted newsletters. Ragan live events draw more than 3,000 professionals annually and provide attendees with access to leading communicators, best practices and rich networking opportunities.

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Through our world-renowned newsletters, conferences, research reports and guides, [Ragan Communications, Inc.](#), delivers practical advice, real-world solutions and field-tested strategies for today’s corporate communicator.

## PR Daily

[PR Daily](#) is a news site that delivers news, advice, and opinions on the public relations, marketing, social media, and media worlds.



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[Ragan’s Crisis Leadership Board](#) is the resource you need before, during and post-crisis. As a Board member, you have access to an online members-only portal, all-access pass to the annual Crisis Management Conference, subscription to the Crisis Communications Daily, access to research, data, case studies, checklists, tipsheets, articles and other resources, plus a peer to peer discussion board to interact with other members. You and your team will also have unlimited use of online training via webinars and virtual conferences on crisis management topics.



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