
Book review:

Stacks, D.W. (2002). *Primer of public relations research*. New York: Guilford.

Reviewed by:
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There is a dearth of texts on public relations research. This book should be on the shelf of every academic library, in the possession of every lecturer responsible for undergraduate public relations courses, and in the office of those practitioners who are serious about maintaining a strategic approach to public relations practice. It is an immensely practical book and written in a personal style using descriptive language that makes some of the complex factors of research very understandable.

Undergraduates will get an excellent introduction to the value of research as a core public relations competency, they will be informed about research methods (both informal and formal), and will also be given clear directions on how to write and present a research report. Academics will find the book very useful when developing course material, especially as it discusses most public relations-specific research methods, and provides review questions and a practice problem at the end of each chapter as starting points for tutorials and discussions

The three introductory chapters clearly articulate the need for research as a key factor in the growth of public relations as a management function and to assess programme effectiveness. The author argues strongly that “a more comprehensive body of knowledge is needed to address questions dealing with change in social and economic environments” (p. 13) and that only research is capable of addressing such questions.

Chapter Three discusses research ethics and the importance of obtaining approvals, the need for confidentiality, and who owns the data. The observation is made that there are no specific references to research ethics in any of the United

States of America’s public relations codes of practice. This is also the case in Australia and the industry should seriously investigate this point if it wishes to advance its case for higher standards of practice, as it would help in making research a core foundation point for the development of the professional standing of public relations. The only negative is that Mark McElreath is not given acknowledgement for the excellent research he has done in the field of ethical public relations campaigns.

Informal research methods (historical and secondary), case studies, informal observations and content analysis are thoroughly covered. The chapter on case studies is especially of interest as this method of research often does not find favour with academics from other disciplines. Stacks makes several strong points, particularly on the relationship between grounded theory and case studies.

For non-mathematical, creative, public relations people, the chapters on measurement, sampling, surveys and polls, experiments, and descriptive and inferential statistical reasoning, provide detailed and clear descriptions on these complex matters. The author provides examples from his own research to illustrate how statistics can be used and supplements this aspect of the book with diagrams and charts that contribute to understanding. Those academics not statistically inclined will find Professor Stack’s presentation refreshing.

The chapter on experimental methods makes the caveat that practitioners rarely have the time or budget to engage in this form of research but the author posits that with much more theory around today, researchers should be testing those theories to ensure they stand up to scrutiny.

The final two chapters, Writing and Evaluating the Request for Research Proposal, and Writing and Presenting the Final Research, while brief, offer practical tips on how to make the best use out of the time and effort put into research.

Stacks keeps making the point in each chapter how useful research is to the practitioner at any level and its “importance in selling the results” (p. 206).