

# 2025 State of Public Relations in Canada

Ethics, AI and reframing the professional field.

October 2025





Leger











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The Canadian Public Relations Society

October 2025 cprs.ca



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# Introduction

The 2025 State of Public Relations in Canada research, conducted by Leger on behalf of the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS), reveals a professional field navigating deep reputational, technological and institutional change. The research includes quantitative survey data from the Canadian public, business leaders and communications management and public relations professionals. It also includes qualitative insights from the 2025 CPRS National Conference in Banff, and additional conversations and academic commentary. From this, three themes emerge:

- 1. Naming and identity
- 2. Artificial intelligence and governance
- 3. The evolving role of professional associations

These themes reflect not only current attitudes, but a clear evolution in the professional field's challenges and priorities, as evidenced in earlier CPRS thought leadership documents such as The Elevation of Public Relations paper; What We Heard, The Future of Public Relations in Canada; 2020 Public Relations Perceptions Survey, and Trust Me, I'm in PR: Trust, relationships and the profession in Canada. The issues raised in these reports have since evolved into measurable gaps and expectations.

### What's new in 2025?

In 2020, the Public Relations Perceptions Survey was the first of its kind, exploring trust, ethics and expectations for communications and public relations in Canada by surveying both communications management and public relations professionals and Canadians. The 2020 survey provided a benchmark of trust and ethical perception for 'communications and public relations professionals' as one group.

In 2025, the research team split the question on trust, with half the Canadian respondents completing the survey about communications professionals and the other half seeing only the term public relations professionals. Business leaders were also surveyed along similar lines, bringing more depth and understanding to how we're perceived by the communities and the organizations we serve.



# A profession or not?

Even before the research and national discussions, we find ourselves repeatedly asking:

Are we a profession, an industry, a sector, a practice, or something else entirely?

For the purposes of this report, the authors have chosen to use the term professional field. This reflects that we're professionals, many of whom adhere to ethical standards and achieve certain levels of education and accreditation, working in an unregulated environment. Our field of work is diverse, wide-ranging and spans across sectors, industries and organizations.

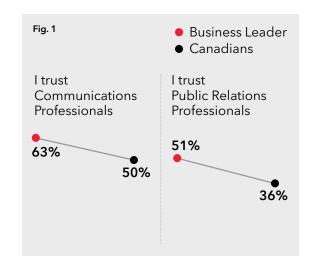


# What's in a name: trust and the terminology divide

Public trust in the field and its professionals remain fragile and the language used to describe what we do matters.

Close to two thirds of business leaders (63%) trust communications professionals vs. 51% for public relations professionals, representing a 12-point gap in trust. Both terms ranked lower in trust when compared to journalists (67%) and subject matter or technical experts (87%). Communications professionals were viewed as more ethical at 66% compared to 54% for public relations professionals. (Fig. 1)

When it comes to the Canadian public, we see the trend continue with 36% of Canadians expressing trust in public relations professionals, while 50% trust communications professionals (with a combined result of 46% in 2020). Further, 52% of Canadians believe communications professionals act ethically vs. 41% for public relations professionals (with a combined result of 52% in 2020). (Fig. 1)



Interestingly, the preference is stronger within the professional field itself with 67% of professionals reporting they identify as communications professionals while only 29% identify as public relations professionals. The divide widens when gender is considered with women more likely to prefer being referred to as a communications professional (75%). This preference is further reinforced amongst newer members of CPRS (1-9 years) at 83%, suggesting the title carries fewer negative connotations and is perceived as more inclusive and comprehensive. (Fig. 2)

67% Communications professional

Women prefer Communications professional: (75% vs 50% of men)

**29%** Public Relations professional

Men prefer Public Relations professional: (50% vs 20% of women)

While professionals trust one another (94%) and believe they act ethically (97%), it's clear that public and business leader perception has not kept pace. The public demands accountability and ethics, and perceptions of both appear to shift based on title.

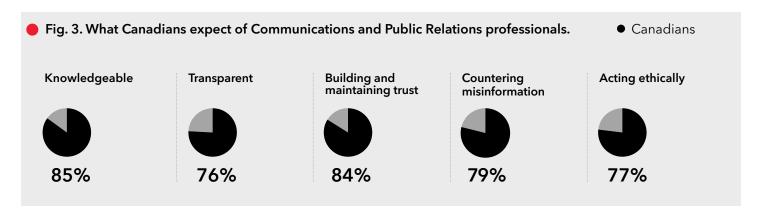
This gap is more than semantics. Qualitative feedback from CPRS National Conference breakout discussions reflects discomfort with the legacy of PR as spin. One participant remarked: "We're still undoing decades of spin culture." Others shared that the PR label undermines credibility and oversimplifies the strategic nature of their work.

"We're still undoing decades of spin culture."



And yet, the divergence ends when we dive deeper, showing alignment about the role and the expectations of professionals.

- When asked about the value of the role, Canadians, business leaders and professionals all emphasized ethics, trust-building and helping organizations navigate complexity.
- Canadians rated being knowledgeable (85%) and transparent (76%); building and maintaining trust (84%); countering misinformation (79%); and acting ethically (77%) as the top expectations of the function, regardless of the naming. (Fig. 3)



• Similarly, business leaders identified strategy (38%), thought leadership (34%), stakeholder engagement (38%) and organizational listening (33%) as top priorities for their communications management and public relations professionals. (Fig. 4)





Negative opinions on the decline. Despite the divide on naming, the 2025 results indicate a decrease in negative perceptions since 2020 with 51% of Canadians feeling ethics have rarely been part of the profession and 57% agreeing that professionals use ethics as a posturing opportunity (down from 67%).



This theme reflects a longer-term trend. <u>The Elevation of Public</u> Relations paper flagged early concerns about the outdated and misunderstood PR label, advocating for a modernized vocabulary aligned with strategy and trust. <u>Trust Me, I'm in PR:</u> Trust, relationships and the profession in Canada also revealed that the public associates PR with manipulation, reinforcing the need to evolve thve profession's language and positioning.

According to a study of more than 100 Canadian communications leaders, conducted by Dr. Terry Flynn of McMaster University, more than 50% of respondents believed the name of the professional field should be Communications (33%) or Communications Management (22%) while only 9% chose public relations or public affairs.

This misalignment calls for action. If the term public relations alone no longer conveys the strategic, ethical and relational value affirmed in the official CPRS-endorsed definition: "Public relations is the strategic management of relationships between an organization and its diverse publics, through the use of communication, to achieve mutual understanding, realize organizational goals and serve the public interest" (Flynn, Gregory & Valin, 2008), then continuing to exclude the word communications from how we describe the professional field could reinforce public skepticism rather than resolve it.

The CPRS and similar associations exist precisely to shine a light on unethical behaviour, to call out bad actors, and to set and uphold professional standards. Naming matters, but so does accountability. The goal is to evolve how we describe a professional field that now includes strategic counsel, ethical guidance, stakeholder listening and Al governance.

Associations must continue to provide ethical oversight and training while embracing the full scope of the professional field. We're seeing this nascent movement take shape. Australia's national association has rebranded as Communications and Public Relations Australia, noting the evolution of the field and symbolizing "a broader scope, embracing all communications and public relations professionals."



"It's clear that the issue is the name, not the function. Canadians, professionals and business leaders agree about what professionals do, should do and what skills matter most."



In an environment where more than two-thirds of Canadian professionals identify as communications professionals, continuing to use only public relations when describing ourselves risks alienation of professionals and constraining public understanding of what the professional field truly delivers. This isn't an either/or, it is a yes/and approach.

Reclaiming the full scope of our professional field requires more inclusive, future-facing language. Language that better reflects how the public perceives our value, how professionals identify themselves, and how associations uphold accountability.

# Artificial Intelligence: adoption outpaces governance

Al is widely used by professionals for content tasks but is not seen by business leaders as a key strategic function of communications management and public relations. In 2025, 55% of professionals report using AI weekly or more, mostly for content creation and data analysis and 73% view AI as having a positive impact on their work.

Even with widespread use, governance remains unclear. While 90% of professionals say Al must be used ethically, few report formal oversight or guidance, only 27% reported having a wellestablished and implemented AI policy. (Fig. 5)

Fig. 5

of professionals report using Al weekly or more

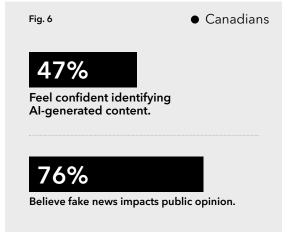
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This comes at a time where Canadians have concerns. Only 47% of Canadians feel confident identifying Al-generated content, and 76% believe fake news affects public opinion. As mentioned previously, there is an expectation among Canadians that communications management and public relations professionals address fake news and false information (79%) and expect them to use AI ethically (57%). (Fig. 6)

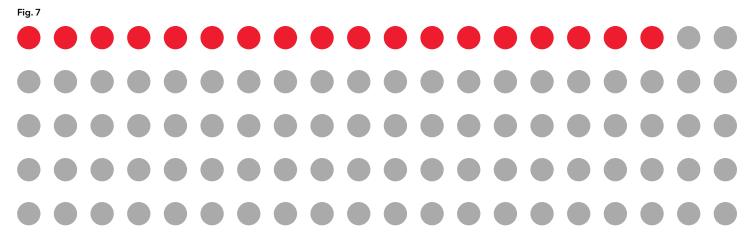




Business leaders, despite seeing the strategic importance of the function in general, don't see professionals at the table when it comes to Al. Only 18% cited helping their organization with Al adoption as a priority for their communications management and public relations professionals, well behind stakeholder engagement (38%), organizational listening (33%) and strategic leadership (38%). (Fig. 7)

Only

felt that communications and public relations professionals had a role helping their organization with AI adoption and transformation.



Here we see another divergence. Professionals are leaning into the tactical benefits of AI, specifically generative AI. At the same time, business leaders, who view strategic competencies such as thought leadership, engagement and listening as important, don't see how these skills support AI adoption and governance. AI is an area where we as professionals could and should lead, yet we risk being left out of the conversation. This will continue if we don't move our focus beyond just how AI makes our tactical work more efficient, to how the opportunities and challenges AI presents for our organizations and society as a whole.

This isn't a new conversation. In 2017, the *Elevation of Public* Relations paper warned that the professional field would be confined to tactical work if it failed to expand strategic and analytical capacity. We're seeing this play out in 2025. During consultations in 2017, professionals identified the need for more information but underestimated the speed of AI adoption, ranking it among the lowest of emerging trends impacting the professional field.

It's resulted in a situation where, as one professional noted during the 2025 CPRS National Conference Banff workshop "we're running with AI before we've learned to walk with policy."



This shift requires re-skilling. Ethical use alone is not enough. Professionals must understand how AI systems are trained, how bias is embedded and how decision-making is shaped by automated logic. It also requires continued focus on how communications and public relations contributes strategically to the goals and objectives of the organizations we serve, whether that is increased trust and confidence, market value, social licence to operate or growth.

Communications management and public relations professionals are well positioned to influence AI transformation, but only if they evolve beyond the content layer. Business leaders already trust the profession's strategic judgment in other domains. That credibility must now be applied to Al governance. Otherwise, AI will be implemented without the insights of the very people most equipped to understand its impact on trust and reputation.

The risk is real and growing. We're already witnessing the credibility and reputational impacts large institutions, universities and governments are experiencing due to a lack of clear governance and risk management around the use of Al, leading to an emerging theme in crisis communications. Communications management and public relations professionals have an opportunity to support Al adoption while protecting their organization's reputation and keeping the confidence of their interest holders.

# The role of associations: from gatekeepers to stewards

CPRS and similar bodies remain vital to the professional field, but their role must evolve.

Canadians believe in ethics. In fact, 83% of Canadians believe communications management and public relations professionals should be governed by a code of ethics while 86% agree CPRS should help enhance and enforce professional standards. And 67% of Canadians say organizations should only hire professionals who hold an APR designation. (Fig. 8)

Professionals agree there should be a code of professional ethics (97%) and support enforcing ethical code violations (83%). CPRS members feel even more strongly, with 100% supporting the code of professional standards and 94% supporting enforcement actions for unethical behaviour. (Fig. 8)



The capabilities that communications management and public relations professionals exhibit, listening, sensemaking, narrative framing and stakeholder connection are the exact competencies most needed to guide Al integration. But only if we step into that space.

Fig. 8



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Participants in the 2025 National Conference Banff workshop emphasized the need for CPRS to reinforce and uphold ethical standards. A prominent comment stated: "We must be seen to be leading in ethics." Another participant urged CPRS to "take a stand and speak out when ethical lines are crossed," highlighting an expectation for visible leadership in ethical advocacy.

As these expectations increase, and the value of ethical oversight trends upward, the traditional professional membership model is under pressure. Younger professionals are less likely to join professional associations and are more skeptical of credentialing, preferring modular, on-demand, participatory engagement over rigid dues-based models. Digital platforms now offer alternative spaces for networking and visibility, often without the ethical accountability associations provide.

These pressures mirror concerns raised in the 2018 What We Heard Report, which highlighted the need for associations to act as enablers of purpose and values, not gatekeepers of status. The Elevation of Public Relations paper further called for renewed focus on standards-setting, ethical leadership and public advocacy. <u>Trust Me, I'm in PR: Trust, relationships and the</u> profession in Canada emphasized the association's unique role in building public understanding and safeguarding legitimacy.

Professionals and Canadians agree professional associations should champion the professional field (96% professionals, 87% Canadians), enhance the code of professional standards with policy, education and training (96% professionals, 87% Canadians), and provide direction on the ethical use of AI (92% professionals, 83% Canadians). Similar results were seen in the 2020 study, pointing to an appreciation for the role professional associations play outside of enforcement.

To act, associations must provide tangible, visible adoption of a professional code of ethics; lead and influence Al-transformation through policy development, education and training; explore flexible membership and learning models and build trust through transparency and shared purpose.



"Professional associations must become platforms of trust and stewards of ethical public relations. Their legitimacy will rest not in exclusivity, but in credibility, utility and leadership on urgent issues like Al governance and ethics."



# **Final reflections**

The 2025 State of Public Relations Report reveals a professional field wrestling with trust and identity while rapidly adopting new technologies without the policy frameworks to support them, all while managing the changing expectations of and engagement with professional associations.

Canadian communications management and public relations professionals are not alone in facing these challenges, and it's not the first time we've confronted questions of identity, ethics and transformation. But the data suggests that public relations, as both a term and a practice, must evolve.

Our professional field faces three urgent imperatives:

- · Review our name with a lens of inclusion, reflecting what's important to professionals.
- Take a leadership role in Al governance, before it governs us or leaves us behind.
- Reimagine associations as engines of ethics, innovation and flexible training and professional development.

We've been here before. We've considered more inclusive language, expanded our understanding of the professional field and re-affirmed our commitment to ethical practice in an environment of confusion and polarization. Communications management and public relations professionals have stepped into these conversations with the courage to change and a focus on ethical practice and it is time to do it again - guided by our values and a commitment to earning and keeping the trust of those we serve (em dash inserted by human).





# Methodology

The 2025 State of Public Relations research initiative was led by the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) to assess the evolving landscape of trust, identity, AI, and ethics in the communications management and public relations professional field across Canada. The findings are based on three integrated research streams, all conducted in 2025:

# **Quantitative Surveys**

- 1. General Public Survey (n=1,512) was conducted by Leger in Spring 2025 using a nationally representative sample of Canadian adults. Respondents were randomly assigned to evaluate either "communications professionals" or "public relations professionals" on measures of trust, ethics, and credibility. The survey also included questions on AI awareness, misinformation, and expectations for professional standards.
- 2. Business Leaders Survey (n=100) was conducted by Leger in August 2025 with a panel of senior decision-makers in Canadian organizations. The survey explored trust in professional groups, expectations of communications leadership, and views on strategic priorities such as AI, stakeholder engagement and thought leadership.
- 3. PR and Communications Professionals Survey (n=181) An open-link survey was fielded by CPRS in Spring 2025 and distributed to professionals in the sector by Leger. The survey focused on identity preferences, ethics, AI use, AI policy awareness and perspectives on the role of professional associations.

### Qualitative Research

- 1. CPRS National Conference Breakout Discussions (n=3 sessions). Three breakout discussions were conducted during the 2025 CPRS National Conference in Banff. These facilitated small-group discussions focused on trust, ethics and PR's role in society; what's in a name does PR have a PR problem; and megatrends how our thinking has changed and what it means for the future. Participant insights were documented and coded to identify recurring themes and sector priorities.
- 2. Dublin Conversations 2025 #ConversationsFest roundtable and stakeholder Interviews provided qualitative insights from association leaders and advisors on governance, membership models and emerging issues.
- 3. CPRS Thought Leadership Council review and input provided qualitative and quantitative insights from senior leaders on inclusivity, Al governance and emerging issues.

### **Secondary Research**

- 1. Four background documents were reviewed to provide historical context and validate evolving trends:
  - Elevation of Public Relations (CPRS 2017)
  - What We Heard: Future of PR & Communications in Canada (CPRS 2018)
  - 2020 Public Relations Perceptions Survey (Leger & CPRS, 2020)
  - Trust Me, I'm in PR: Trust, relationships and the profession (Blanchette & Killingsworth 2025)

These reports helped map professional identity, ethics, and association priorities over time, providing continuity with previous consultations and strategic goals.



# About the authors

Kim Blanchette, APR, Chart.PR, FCPRS Executive Vice President Castlemain/ChangeMakers

Kim Blanchette is an award-winning communications leader with over 35 years of experience in crisis communications, class action advisory, and leadership training. At Castlemain, she leads the Class Action Advisory and Communications practice, supporting Indigenous Class Members in landmark Settlements through trauma-informed and culturally grounded engagement programs. She has also won national and international recognition for her crisis response work during the Swissair Flight 111 crash and Alberta's wildfires and floods.

Kim is a Fellow of the Canadian Public Relations Society, Canada's first Chartered PR professional through the UK's CIPR, the 2021 recipient of the Philip A. Novikoff Award and a co-recipient of the 2018 Lamp of Service award. A past National President of CPRS, Kim is currently a Board Member. At ChangeMakers, she delivers executive training programs that prepare leaders to communicate, facilitate, and respond under pressure, most recently with a focus on how AI can transform crisis planning and response.

**Lisa Covens, MA, CAIP** Senior Vice President Leger

With nearly 25 years of marketing research experience, Lisa started at Leger in 2003. As an SVP, she manages the Communications and Public Relations practice in Central Canada. Her clients include government, top PR agencies in Canada, and communications practitioners at several corporations, associations and pharmaceutical companies. Lisa is an active member of the Canadian Public Relations Society as Presiding Officer of Awards and a member of the Thought Leadership Council. In recognition of her dedication and work to enhance the image of CPRS in the eyes of Canadians, she was honoured with the prestigious CPRS Outstanding Achievement Award in June 2024 and has served as a National Board Member. Lisa is also a spokesperson for Leger and frequently presents on topics such as reputation, economic confidence, and the importance of market research during a crisis. Her team has led pivotal research initiatives at Leger, particularly focused on newcomers.



## Dr. Terence (Terry) Flynn, APR, FCPRS, LM

Associate Professor, Department of Communication Studies & Media Arts Director, Master of Communications Management degree program Faculty of Humanities McMaster University

Dr. Terry Flynn is one of Canada's leading public relations/communications management researchers. Following a 20-year professional communications consulting career, Terry joined the faculty of McMaster University after completing his Ph.D. studies at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. During his consulting career, he built an international practice specializing in crisis and risk communications and public/community engagement working with such organizations as: the Town of Walkerton Ontario; the U.S. Navy Public Health Agency; NASA; the Vinyl Council of Canada and the Chemical Manufacturers' Association. He is currently a member of a number of professional and academic organizations including: the Canadian Public Relations Society - and was its elected President in 2009-2010; the Institute for Public Relations (Board of Trustees); and the Arthur W. Page Society (Board of Trustees). In 2015, Dr. Flynn was given the prestigious Philip A. Novikoff Award by the CPRS, for superior contributions to the advancement of the profession in Canada and throughout the world. In 2018, Terry was named the CPRS Diamond Jubilee "Mentor of the Year" award and in 2021 he was awarded the Heather Pullen Memorial Award for Ethical Public Relations from the CPRS. An award-winning teacher, Terry's presentations entertain and engage and provide participants with meaningful insights and lessons from the frontlines. In July 2019 he was reappointed as the Director of the McMaster-Syracuse University Master of Communications Management degree program, a position he first held from 2004-2011.

### Colleen Killingsworth, MCM, APR, FCPRS

Principal **CK Communications Strategies** 

Colleen Killingsworth is a senior consultant with more than 30 years of experience in strategic communications, change management, and executive advisory roles. She has led complex, multistakeholder projects in sectors such as energy, health care, education, and municipal government. Her work spans organizational transitions, reputational risk, internal communications, and stakeholder engagement, often during periods of high-stakes transformation. She is known for earning the trust of both leadership and front-line teams, and for aligning communications strategies to business outcomes.

Colleen's contributions to the profession have been recognized nationally and internationally. In 2013, she was named one of Canada's top PR Influencers in a CPRS and Cision Canada survey. A past National President of CPRS, Colleen was the 2011 recipient of the Philip A. Novikoff Award and the 2018 recipient of the CPRS Lamp of Service for co-leading the renewal of the Society's Strategic Framework, which generated the highest level of engagement in its history. In 2025, she was named CPRS PR Thought Leader of the Year for co-authoring Rethinking the Table: Women Public Relations Leaders in Canada. Colleen has held senior roles with the University of Calgary and the Canadian Centre for Energy Information and has supported senior leaders at Cenovus. A published researcher and educator, she holds degrees from the University of Nevada, Reno, and McMaster University, and is certified in change management (PROSCI).



# **About the Canadian Public** Relations Society | cprs.ca

Founded in 1948, the Canadian Public Relations Society is a not-for-profit association of professionals dedicated to the practice, management, and teaching of public relations and communications. Comprising 13 local societies, CPRS' mission is to build a national public relations and communications management community through professional development, accreditation, collaboration with thought leaders, a commitment to ethics and a code of professional standards, advocacy for the profession, and support to members at every stage of their careers.

# The CPRS Thought Leadership Council

The CPRS Thought Leadership Council brings senior communications management and public relations professionals together to create a made-in-Canada approach to researchdriven, actionable ideas to advance and elevate the professional field as a critical part of organizational success.

# **CPRS Thought Leadership Council Members**

Colleen Killingsworth, MCM, APR, FCPRS, Principal, CKCommunications Strategies and TLC Chair

Kim Blanchette, APR, Chart.PR, FCPRS, EVP, Class Action and Community Delivery and CPRS Board Member

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Richard Truscott, MBA, APR, Vice President, Prairie Sky Strategy

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