

2020 Public Relations Perceptions Survey What We Heard

(September 2020)



What we set out to do

In 2017, the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) kicked-off a national conversation on the future of public relations in Canada. Consulting with hundreds of Public Relations (PR) professionals from across the country, the Future of CPRS Committee developed a Strategic Framework focussed on delivering member value through a focus on four key priorities: community, collaboration, conscience and careers.

Throughout 2017, we heard overwhelmingly that CPRS members place a high priority on ethics and professional standards. In a global context that included phrases like “fake news” and “alternative facts” along with confusion about which information sources can be trusted. CPRS made a commitment to ensure that “CPRS members are seen as ethical professionals who adhere to and uphold a code of professional standards.”

The launch of the PR Ethics Task Force reinforced this commitment and led to the development of tools and resources to support ethical public relations and decision-making. At the same time, the Public Relations and Advocacy Committee created new tools, such as the Fake News Primer, and ensured the CPRS took a public stand on unethical public relations practices.

What we set out to do (cont'd)

As public relations professionals, we know that tactics are not enough. In the 2018 Strategic Framework, we established an important measurement; establishing a benchmark of public perception of PR in Canada. We wanted to understand where Canadians and PR professionals agree and where they differ, how public relations is perceived by the general public, and test the value of the work the CPRS carries out in advocating for accreditation, professional development and overseeing ethical standards. And, we wanted to establish a baseline to measure the results of our advocacy and communications efforts going forward.

This is a unique survey. While many professional organizations and academic institutions conduct research on PR professionals, few, if any, seek to gain insights from the general public.

Methodology

This research would not have been possible without the generous support of Leger, who conducted the survey on behalf of the CPRS in spring 2020.

QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH INSTRUMENT



An online survey.



1501 Canadians and 209 PR Communicators.



Completed between Feb 03 and May 01, 2020, using Leger's online panel.



The margin of error for this study was:

+/-2.5%, 19 times out of 20, for Canadians; and

+/-6.8%, 19 times out of 20, for PR Communicators.



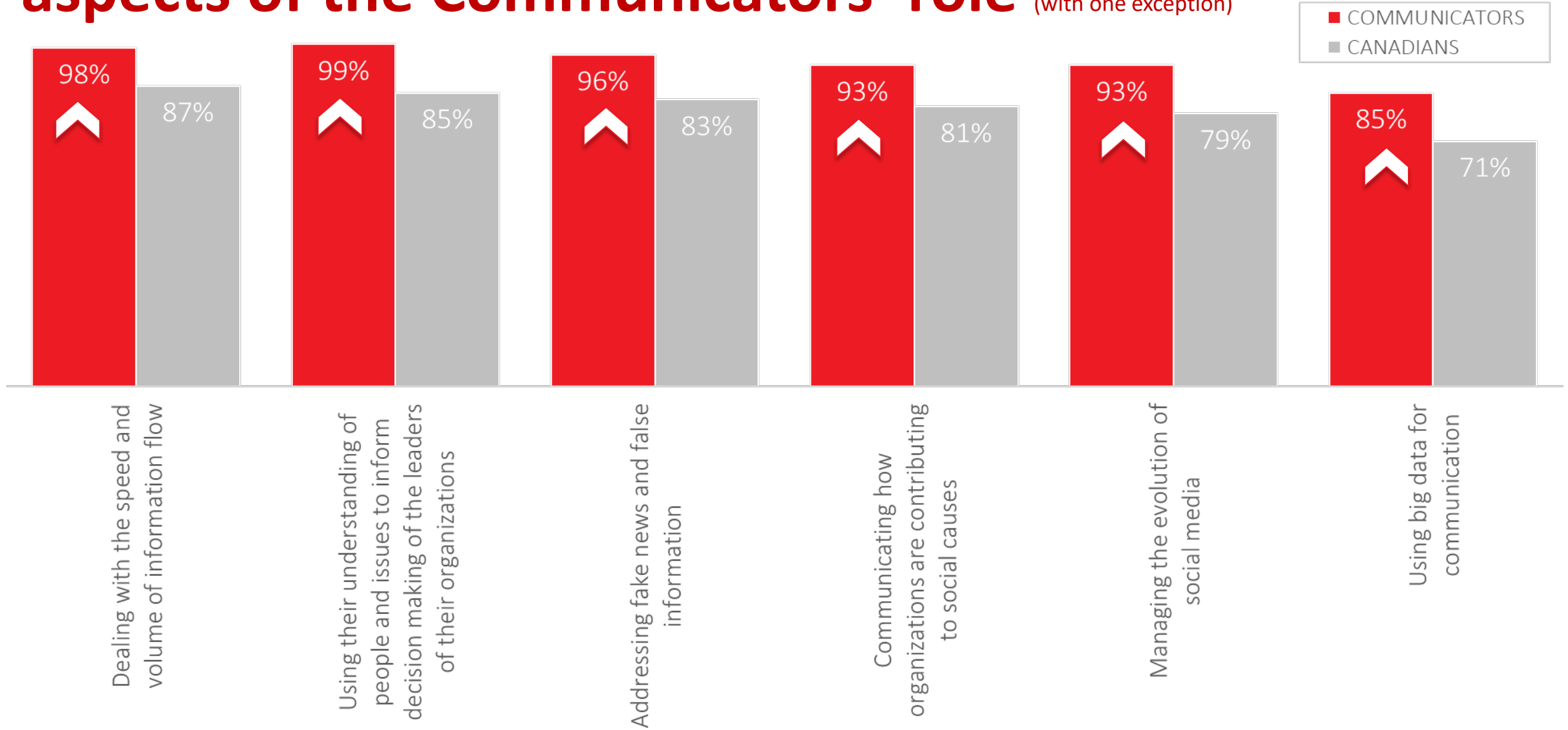
Throughout this presentation, arrows are used to show significant differences between PR communicators and Canadians.

What we heard

Not surprisingly, there were areas of significant alignment between Canadians and public relations and communications professionals, especially when it comes to the role of PR in organizations, the importance of ethics and accreditation and the role of the professional association.

However, when it comes to perceptions, public relations and communications professionals report stronger levels of trust in their colleagues than Canadians and see themselves as more credible and trustworthy than the general population.

Eight-in-ten believe in the important aspects of the Communicators' role (with one exception)



Agreement and understanding the role of communications

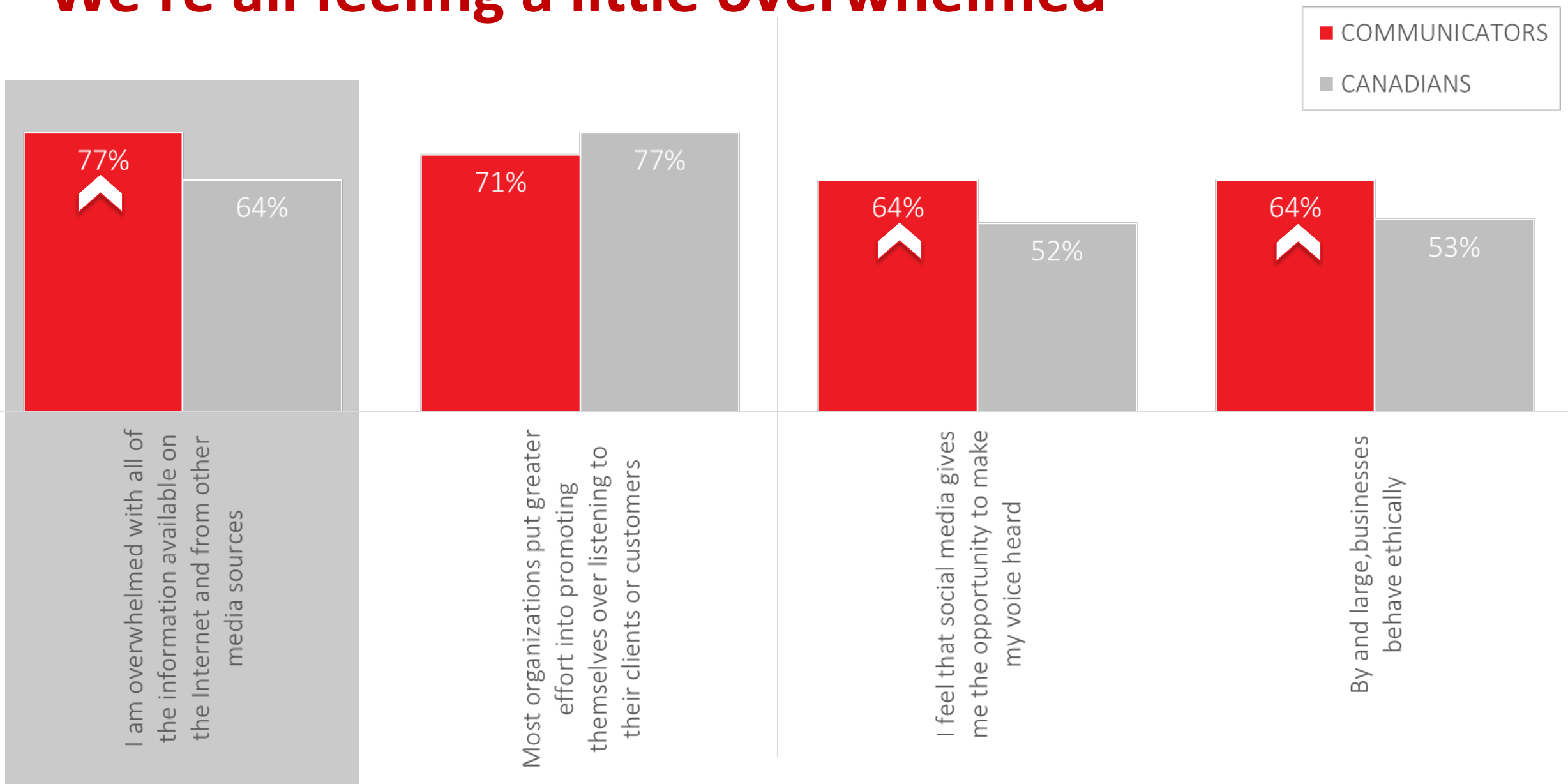
There was strong agreement on the importance of the various aspects of the work of public relations and communications professionals, especially regarding the need to manage the speed and volume of information (98% of public relations and communications professionals vs. 87% of Canadians) and addressing fake news and false information (96% of public relations and communications professionals vs. 83% Canadians).

Canadians (85%) and public relations and communications professionals (99%) strongly agreed that communicators use their understanding of people and issues to inform decision makers within their organizations.

We're all feeling a little overwhelmed

When it comes to the massive amounts of information we process, both Canadians (64%) and public relations and communications professionals (77%) are feeling overwhelmed. While there is agreement that social media provides an opportunity for voices to be heard, there is a sentiment that most organizations put more effort into promotion, rather than listening to their customers and clients. The majority of respondents report feeling that businesses behave ethically, with public relations and communications professionals (64%) expressing stronger agreement than Canadians (53%).

We're all feeling a little overwhelmed



Professional standards are important

There is strong alignment (more than 80% agreement from both communications and public relations professionals and the general public) that the work of communications and public relations professionals is important for their organizations.

There is even stronger alignment (85% or more agreement from both communications and public relations professionals and the general public) around the CPRS's role in setting, promoting and regulating standards within the profession. There is also alignment (more than 80% agreement from both communications and public relations professionals and the general public) in CPRS's role in maintaining a publicly available directory of members who adhere to a professional code of conduct and ethics.

Eight-in-ten (87% of communications and public relations professionals and 83% of the general public) agree that CPRS has a role to play in enhancing the code of professional standards with appropriate policies, education and training.

CPRS has a role to play in enhancing the code of professional standards



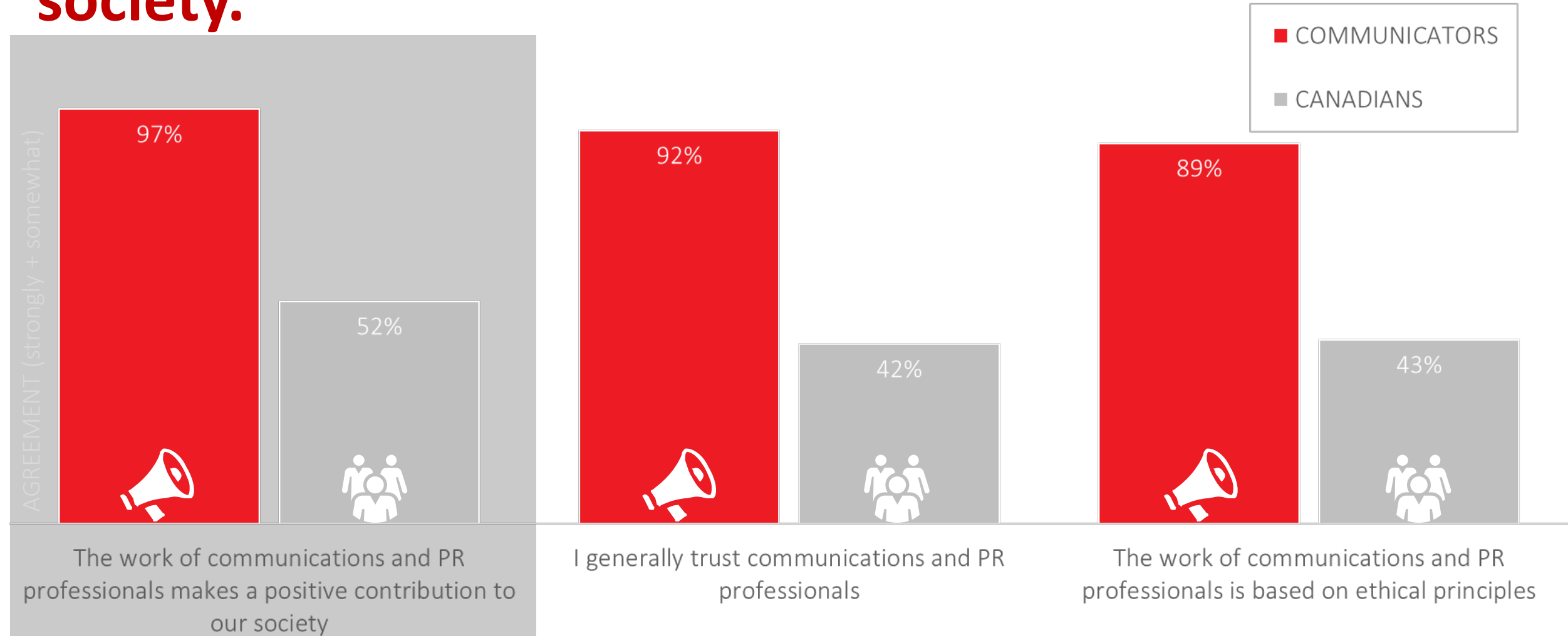
Professional standards are important

This is consistent with feedback we receive from the CPRS members each year. In fact, eight-in-ten members who participated in the 2019 National Member Survey (n=238) reported that the code of professional standards, professional development and public advocacy were the top three most relevant benefits of CPRS membership.

While there is strong alignment in our current study on questions around the importance of having a code of ethics (more than 80% agreement from both communications and public relations professionals and the general public), there is a divergence of opinion when it comes to trust, credibility, and other aspects of living the code of ethics.

Nearly all communicators (94%) believe those in their profession act ethically; however, the general public ranks communications and public relations professionals (52%) as the sixth most ethical source of information behind friends and /or family (91%), subject matter experts (81%), employees of organizations (72%), journalists (61%), and advocates (59%).

Views are different on communicators' ethics and their positive contribution to society.



Why the gap?

So if there is agreement on the role public relations and communications professionals play and alignment on ethics and professional development, why do we see this gap in credibility and trust?

There are a number of factors that may be at play:

- **Lack of awareness:** it's not surprising that CPRS members support greater advocacy for ethical PR and actions to call out 'bad actors' in our profession. Amplifying our messaging on fake news, ethics and accreditation will help raise awareness and credibility, especially when considering the extent to which Canadians support these initiatives.

Why the gap?

- The term ‘PR’: there is a growing concern around the negative inference of the term PR or Public Relations. In fact, a review conducted by the leaders of the Dublin Conversations demonstrates a declining trend in the use of the term public relations. In fact, the words public relations are almost totally absent in a scan of the top 20 PR agencies in the UK, revealing terms like ‘communications’, strategy, and brand instead. At the same time, the terms “PR Fail” and “PR Disaster” have spiked in use, especially in the 2000s, pointing to a negative connotation with the term overall.
- The 2019/20 State of the Profession survey by the Chartered Institute for Public Relations also found that two biggest challenges for the profession are identified as *how others view the profession*, which supports the above review, and *the value which is placed upon the work of practitioners*, which supports the findings of our survey.

Why the gap?

- Ethics advocate Shannon Bowers notes the burden public relations and communications professionals are under to balance public and employer interests, PR standards and personal values. To become a trusted advisor, practitioners need a sense of independence and responsibility to society and the public interest, and to manifest and concern for the competence and honour of the profession as a whole rather than to the employer of the moment.

Ultimately, this divergence in opinion points to both a **need and an opportunity to champion the role of ethics** and how it is integrated into our daily work. **Even though people may not be aware of our code of ethics and professional standards, they do agree with them.** If communications and public relations professionals can increase public perception on the extent to which they demonstrate ethical communications and public relations, this could in turn increase positive views of the industry.

APR[®] Accreditation means something

There is strong alignment (80% agreement from both communications and public relations professionals and the general public) that CPRS should provide training, professional support and mandatory accreditation.

Both Canadians and communicators see the value of the APR[®] Accreditation.

Communications and public relations professionals take a more individualist view of the APR[®] and believe those who hold the designation provide value to their organizations, make positive contributions to their society, act in an ethical manner and be generally trustworthy.

APR[®] Accreditation means something

While communications and public relations professionals see the value of the APR[®], only 46% (n=238) of members in 2019 reported joining CPRS for accreditation (APR[®]). Four-in-ten members are accredited and one quarter reported being actively/interested in pursuing the APR[®].

The main reason for pursuing the APR[®] is an enhanced professional image (36%). It is also interesting to note that 46% of members and non-members (n=1298) who responded to the CIPR State of the Profession 2020 survey also reported having a professional qualification in public relations; however, only 14% reported being a Chartered Practitioner

The general public is more likely to trust the organizations that hire professional with an APR[®].

In fact, 67% of Canadians believe organizations should only hire communications and public relations professionals who have an APR[®], compared to 33% of communications and public relations professionals.

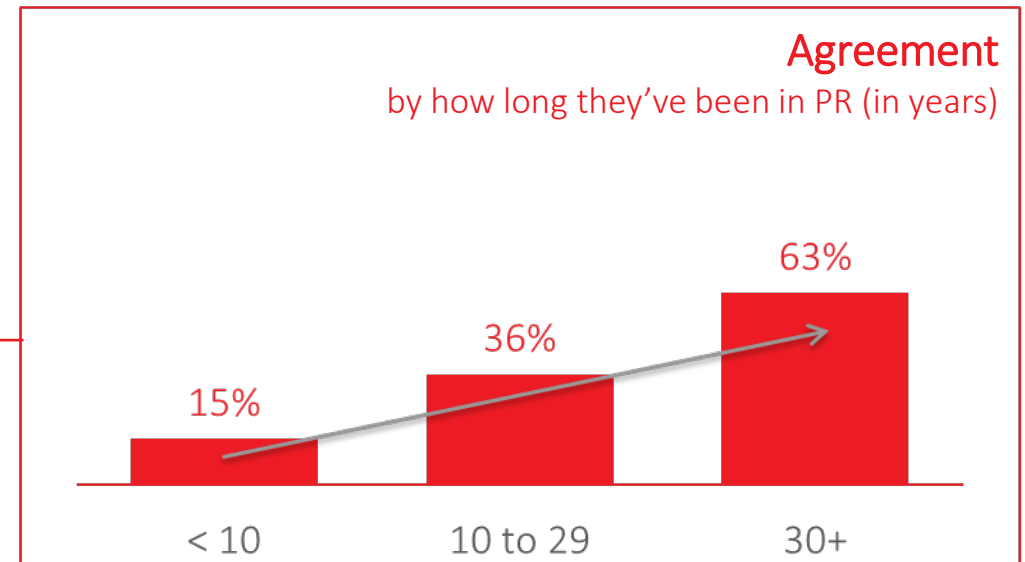
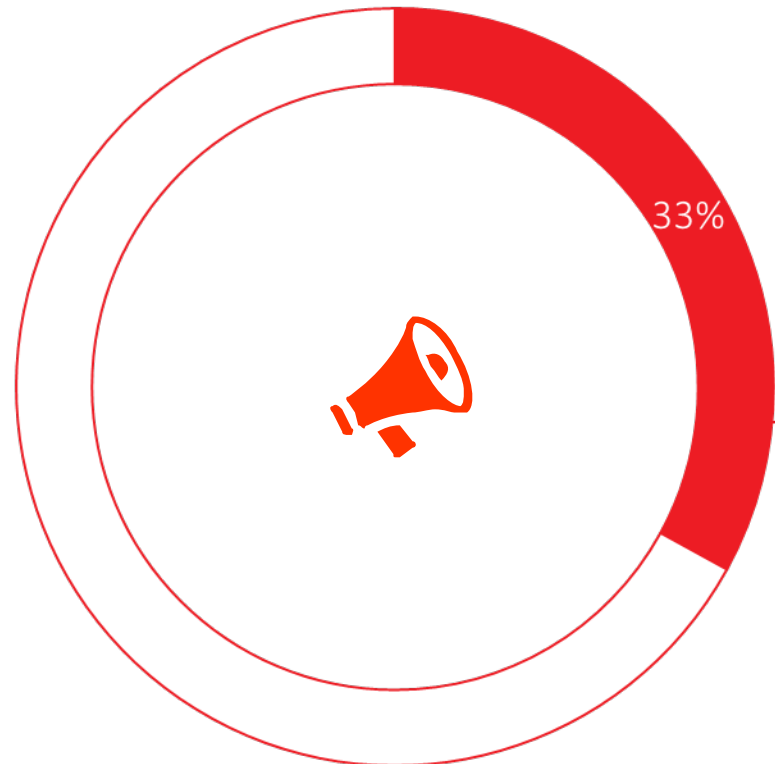
Canadians value APR[®] Accreditation



Longer serving communications and public relations professionals tend to agree with hiring only accredited communicators

“I believe organizations should only hire communications and PR professionals who have an APR®.”

AGREEMENT (strongly + somewhat)



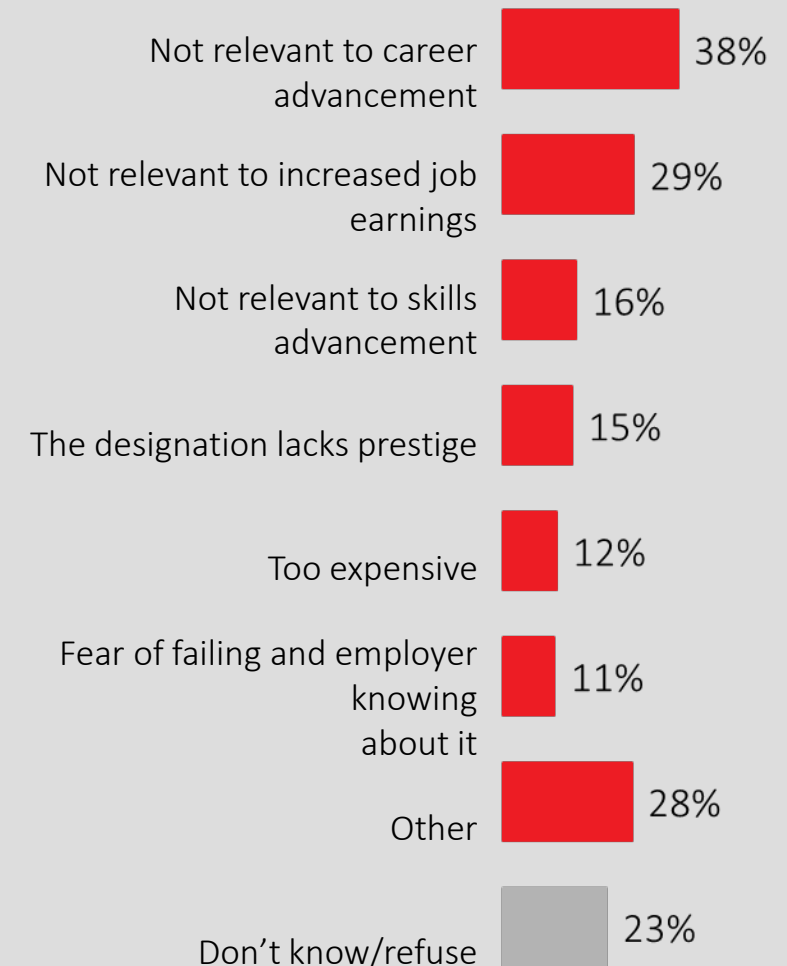
APR[®] Accreditation means something

In *Managing Public Relations*, James Grunig and Todd Hunt stated that “many practitioners tend to hold more ‘careerist’ values than professional values,” meaning they place a higher level of importance on job security, prestige in the organization, salary level, and recognition from superiors.

Understanding the value that Canadians place on the APR[®] and professional standards, there is an opportunity for CPRS to work to close the gap in member and non-member perception the APR[®] is not relevant to their career, to increase job earnings or to skills advancement.

There is also an opportunity for CPRS to partner with post-secondary institutions to promote accreditation for educators and for those who are completing their master degrees in communications management or equivalent.

WHY NOT THE APR[®]?



Accountability is KEY

In addition to support of professional standards and APR[®], there is strong support for the establishment of a publicly available directory of members who adhere to a professional code of conduct and ethics.

This public commitment to ethical public relations was supported by public relations and communications professionals (87%) and Canadians (83%).



What now?

It's clear that while Canadians understand, and to a large degree appreciate the role of communications, there is more work to be done to increase trust and credibility. The CPRS has embarked on and should continue work on a number of strategic initiatives, such as the promotion of ethical public relations, providing resources and training for PR professionals, and publicly calling out unethical behaviour.

In addition, the National Task Force on Ethical Public Relations recommends:

- The establishment of a Public Relations registry, sharing the names of CPRS members who have agreed to the Code of Professional conduct on CPRS.ca (similar to the [CIPR PR Register](#))
- A course on ethics and the code of professional standards as part of the accreditation process
- Continued promotion and advocacy for ethical public relations
- Ensuring Canadian public relations professionals have access to a variety of resources, including those from the Public Relations Society of America, the Global Alliance, and the Chartered Institute of Public Relations
- Continue to provide references and case studies for reference and discussion