Brexit and Public Relations in 2018
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Introduction

The result of the 2016 EU Referendum presented the UK with a deeply complex problem – how to manage the impact and upheaval that will follow the decision to quit the European Union in March 2019. The nature of the UK’s departure from the institutions of the EU is now a central question in British politics. Beyond the decision to leave, the situation is ambiguous, uncertain and framed against a backdrop of political volatility.

We wanted to understand the role public relations is playing in preparing for Brexit. We surveyed members and non-members of the CIPR in the summer of 2017. The full results are available in this document.

For all organisations, Brexit represents a considerable risk. It will bring about significant change, for better or worse, in our economic, political and civic landscape. As the Government negotiates in Brussels, British businesses are trying to understand the likely impact of Brexit. Unsurprisingly, fewer than 1 in 10 of the 251 mostly senior PR professionals surveyed feel that their organisations are happy with the Government’s approach to Brexit.
Key Findings

For public relations professionals, this moment in our history represents an opportunity to demonstrate strategic leadership. 76% of respondents to our survey agreed with this assertion.

As a profession we are assessing the risks and opportunities in Brexit and the changes it will bring about. Our claim to add value in decision-making is based on our familiarity with complexity and ambiguity, and on our abilities to provide advice relating to the impact of events on relationships.

Fundamentally, strategic public relations can help an organisation come to terms with the complexities of Brexit, help it prepare and help it to take a lead among its stakeholder communities. More than 60% of respondents to our survey agreed that better engagement through public relations would improve their organisation’s Brexit preparations. Half thought that preparations would be helped by a stronger organisational understanding of their social context.

Encouragingly, large numbers of practitioners are actively preparing for Brexit through personal development. The majority have a role in Brexit preparation and one third are engaging on this subject at board level. Economic impact and freedom of movement are overwhelmingly the areas of interest.

The need – and the opportunity – is clear. From an in-house perspective, Brexit preparations among organisations are underway but are not advanced. Most clients have discussed Brexit with their agency, but only a quarter of practitioners thought their clients had any level of preparedness.

PR practitioners are probably ahead in their thinking and preparation compared to their clients and employers. Just 30% of respondents feel that their organisations are exploring their strengths and weaknesses against the requirements of Brexit, and few are changing policies to prepare for developments. So are PR practitioners having an effect?

A third of organisations have researched Brexit or discuss it on a regular basis and half are listening to the concerns of stakeholders and supply chains. However, only one in five agency practitioners have been asked to provide Brexit research for clients and just a quarter of agency practitioners are briefing clients on Brexit. It is concerning to note that only 40% of respondents feel that their organisations are talking to staff about Brexit. Perhaps because of the continuing political uncertainty, only one third of practitioners reported engaging with Government on the subject.

The Case for Public Relations

Brexit presents an opportunity across all specialisms – internal communication, public affairs, media relations and investor relations. By working through these specialisms, public relations creates organisational assets that can build resilience through:

- Strong, effective relationships with core stakeholders including staff, customers, suppliers, investors, Government and important interest groups
- Understanding of the organisation’s social context, using all the skills of empathy that public relations can call on, as well as extensive social research
- Leadership to ensure your organisation’s voice is heard beyond its market
- Political intelligence and influence

In a situation characterised by a unique level of uncertainty, volatility, complexity and ambiguity, organisations must find a new level of resilience. They must be both receptive and communicative. They must be led by flexible, highly skilled public relations professionals with the depth of knowledge and experience to respond effectively to change.
Research Summary

A summary with comments and recommendations of a survey carried out by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations in August 2017 to assess the extent to which public relations professionals are prepared for the UK’s departure from the EU in March 2019.

Led by Jon White, PhD, Chart.PR, FCIPR
Methodology

Against the background of uncertainty, the Chartered Institute of Public Relations is examining how it can prepare for Brexit, looking at how it can help its members in their preparations and at whether or not there are opportunities for public relations professionals to help employing organisations and clients in readying themselves for Brexit.

Part of this work has involved surveying members and public relations professionals to get a reading of opinion regarding preparations for Brexit. An online survey completed in August 2017 aimed at CIPR members and other professionals gathered 251 responses. The limitations of working with a small number of responses are clear but they provide an indication of current thinking on Brexit among professionals. They are summarised with comments and recommendations in the following report.

The questions asked are set out in the script of survey questions and the full results are held by the Institute. In the summary, some totals of percentages may add to more or less than 100% due to rounding of figures from the survey analysis.

Survey respondents

Responses came from professionals in all age ranges from 18 to over 60 (18 – 24, 5%, 25 – 34 25%, 35 – 44 27%, 45 – 60 36% and over 60 8%), with the largest group in the 45 – 60 age range. 55% were female, 45% male. All nations and regions of the UK were represented, as well as professionals from outside the country: 50% came from London (38%) and the South East (12%), and the results may be biased towards their views of Brexit.

Many sectors of the economy and employment were represented in the group of respondents, with larger groups from the public sector (national and local government, the emergency services and armed forces) 15%, financial services and corporate practice 8%, education and professional associations (8% each). 93% work in public relations roles and have a wide range of experience – 26% have 21 plus years of experience, 19% 11 – 15 years of experience, 17% 16 – 20 years, 16% 10 – 15 years, 13% 3 – 5 years, and 8% up to 2 years of experience.

Just over three quarters of the respondents are members of CIPR (76%).

By sector, 28% work in-house in the private sector, 20% for consultancies, 20% are independent, 19% in-house in the public sector, and 14% work in-house in the not-for-profit sector.

In terms of seniority, 28% are managers, 19% directors or partners, 17% heads of communication or associate directors, 16% are owners, 11% officers, 6% assistants or executives, 3% fit into other categories, and 1% are interns or trainees.
Professionals were asked to make judgements about their organisations and clients' state of preparedness for Brexit. They were asked to agree or disagree with the following statements, or say that they did not know about preparedness.

**My organisation is ready for Brexit**

- Agreed or strongly agreed: 35%
- Strongly disagreed or disagreed: 38%
- Didn’t know: 23%

(The remainder answered not applicable to this question).

**My organisation has made advanced preparations for Brexit**

- Agreed or strongly agreed: 33%
- Strongly disagreed or disagreed: 47%
- Didn’t know: 15%

(The remainder answered not applicable to this question).

**My organisation has begun preparations for Brexit**

- Agreed or strongly agreed: 53%
- Strongly disagreed or disagreed: 32%
- Didn’t know: 10%

(The remainder answered not applicable to this question).

**My organisation is making no active preparations for Brexit**

- Agreed or strongly agreed: 31%
- Strongly disagreed or disagreed: 42%
- Didn’t know: 11%

(The remainder answered not applicable to this question).

Comments

Just over a third (35%) of respondents feel that their organisations are ready for Brexit. Over half (53%) feel that their organisations have really begun to prepare for Brexit and a third (33%) are advanced in their preparations. 42% feel that their organisations are making some active preparations. Generally, professionals feel informed of their organisation’s plans with only around 10% to 15% unaware of their organisation’s state of readiness.
Less than a quarter (22%) of respondents feel that most of their clients are prepared for Brexit. Fewer than that (21%) don’t believe that even some of their clients are prepared at all. 31% are helping or have helped clients for prepare for Brexit, and nearly half (46%) agree that clients have mentioned Brexit.
Respondents were asked to consider their own role in relation to preparing organisations and clients for Brexit.

Comments
Nearly two thirds (62%) have a role in preparing their organisation for Brexit and nearly three quarters (72%) are taking the initiative to learn more about Brexit to advise their organisation. 38% are advising their organisations at Board level. 91% have a strong interest in Brexit.

I have a role in preparing my organisation for Brexit
- Agreed or strongly agreed: 62%
- Strongly disagreed or disagreed: 23%
- Didn’t know: 9%

I have taken my own initiative in learning about Brexit to help prepare my organisation
- Agreed or strongly agreed: 72%
- Strongly disagreed or disagreed: 19%
- Didn’t know: 4%

I am anxious about how Brexit may affect my organisation
- Agreed or strongly agreed: 67%
- Strongly disagreed or disagreed: 23%
- Didn’t know: 7%

I am advising my organisation at Board level on Brexit preparation
- Agreed or strongly agreed: 47%
- Strongly disagreed or disagreed: 38%
- Didn’t know: 5%

I am not interested in Brexit
- Agreed or strongly agreed: 91%
- Strongly disagreed or disagreed: 7%
- Didn’t know: 4%
Respondents were asked what specific steps are being taken by their organisations to prepare for Brexit.

**We have commissioned or conducted research into the impact of Brexit**

- Said this had been done: 16%
- Said it had not: 27%
- Didn’t know: 57%

**Brexit is a regular agenda item at Board meetings (or the most senior level strategy meeting)**

- Yes: 21%
- No: 31%
- Didn’t know: 48%

**We have an internal committee/working group/taskforce dedicated to preparing for Brexit**

- Had these arrangements in place: 13%
- Did not: 34%
- Didn’t know: 53%

**The public relations function is preparing to communicate the impact of Brexit on the organisation**

- Yes: 16%
- No: 39%
- Didn’t know: 46%

**Brexit preparation is a regular agenda item in senior management meetings**

- Yes: 15%
- No: 32%
- Didn’t know: 52%

**We are listening and talking to our wider stakeholder community about the potential impact of Brexit on our operations**

- Yes: 30%
- No: 12%
- Didn’t know: 58%
Comments
Over a quarter (27%) of organisations have commissioned research into the effects of Brexit and one-third (32%) have regular meetings to discuss Brexit. Larger numbers are listening to the concerns of stakeholders (58%) and participants in their supply chains (47%). For clients, 28% are offering Brexit briefings, and 20% have undertaken research into Brexit for specific clients.

We are listening and talking to our supply chain about the potential impact of Brexit on our business and their business

- Yes: 21%
- No: 47%
- Didn’t know: 32%

We have undertaken in-depth research into Brexit for specific clients

- Yes: 22%
- No: 20%
- Didn’t know: 57%

We are offering Brexit briefings to clients

- Yes: 23%
- No: 28%
- Didn’t know: 50%
Respondents were asked what issues they were most concerned about following Brexit.

From the choices given the following concerns were most prominent:

1. The economic impact of the UK leaving the EU 73%
2. Access to EU markets 55%
3. Market regulation post Brexit 48%
4. Access to skilled labour 47%
5. Exchange rates 44%
6. Investment (future) 41%
7. Supply Chain issues 35%
8. Investment (current) 29%
9. Access to labour 27%
10. Other 20%

Other concerns included funding (access, cuts to funding, and funding for the voluntary sector), impact on members for professional associations, customers, young people. Also among other concerns were legal uncertainties, security questions, travel restrictions, effects on the UK’s standing, reputation and reputation as a centre for education.

Comments
One respondent saw Brexit as “a complete disaster, economically, socially and culturally.” The main concerns are with the economic impact of Brexit, access to the single market and the way the market will work, post-Brexit.
Respondents were asked to identify the three most important areas in terms of their preparation for Brexit.

From a list including:
- Access to EU markets
- Supply Chain issues
- Access to skilled labour
- Access to labour
- The Economic Impact of the UK leaving the EU
- Investment (current)
- Investment (future)
- Exchange rates
- Market regulation post Brexit

The top five chosen were:

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<tr>
<td>Economic impact</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to EU markets</td>
<td>48%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Access to skilled labour</td>
<td>41%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Future investment</td>
<td>32%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Market regulation post Brexit</td>
<td>30%</td>
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Respondents were asked about other issues forming part of Brexit considerations.

One in five respondents described other issues, which included: EU legislation becoming law in the UK and devolved jurisdictions, customs, emerging technologies, ability to live and work in EU member states, intelligence, policing and justice. A number of issues related to ease of movement, for UK nationals to work in the EU, and for EU nationals to continue to work in the UK. One saw restrictions on work in the UK for EU nationals as creating opportunities for UK professional. Another respondent said “the fact is, nothing has been agreed, so how can you consider Brexit if the outcome isn’t known.” Some issues were specific and local, for example relating to ease of movement across the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland.
Respondents were asked on their views on the opportunities presented by Brexit.

**Brexit is an opportunity for PR to demonstrate leadership**
- 14% agreed or strongly agreed
- 9% strongly disagreed or disagreed
- 76% didn’t know

**Preparing for Brexit is having a positive impact on my organisation**
- 31% agreed or strongly agreed
- 24% strongly disagreed or disagreed
- 30% didn’t know

**Better engagement through public relations would improve my organisation’s Brexit preparations**
- 61% agreed or strongly agreed
- 15% strongly disagreed or disagreed
- 17% didn’t know

**My organisation is lobbying to change the government’s approach to Brexit**
- 39% agreed or strongly agreed
- 30% strongly disagreed or disagreed
- 13% didn’t know

**To properly prepare for Brexit, my organisation needs a better understanding of its social context**
- 49% agreed or strongly agreed
- 28% strongly disagreed or disagreed
- 16% didn’t know

**We are lobbying the government about Brexit on behalf of specific clients**
- 39% agreed or strongly agreed
- 12% strongly disagreed or disagreed
- 16% didn’t know

(The remainder answered not applicable to this question)
Respondents were asked about their organisations response to Brexit.

Comments
Only 8% feel that their organisations are happy with the government’s approach to Brexit. Organisations are not obviously motivated about, or acting to prepare for Brexit – only 40% of respondents feel that their organisations are talking to staff about Brexit, 30% of respondents feel that their organisations are exploring their strengths and weaknesses against the requirements of Brexit, and few are changing policies to prepare for developments.
Commentary and recommendations

The CIPR’s survey of public relations professionals on preparations for Brexit, provides a useful reading of opinion. With 251 responses from a practitioner community that includes CIPR members and thousands of other professionals, the survey makes no claims to provide a representative response. It does, though, give a number of pointers to ways in which public relations professionals can better prepare for Brexit, and help their employers and clients to do the same.

The group who responded are predominantly more senior in experience and working level, represent views from different parts of the UK, and reflect the practice in terms of sectors, working settings and gender balance. There is, mentioned earlier, a large group of respondents from London and the South East of the UK, and a further analysis of the results could check whether this group are different in their views from the remainder of the respondents.

Overall, organisations are not seen as well prepared for Brexit or for dealing with the uncertainty that a long period of preparation for Brexit, in whatever form it finally take. Public relations professionals are willing to help in dealing with this uncertainty, but need to do more to inform themselves of the process Brexit involves and the state of their own organisations’ and clients’ preparation to handle change.

To help them in this, the CIPR will assist its members (and the wider profession) to prepare for and deal with the period of uncertainty the UK is facing.
Preparing the Profession

Public relations, as a strategic management discipline, has a role in helping organisations prepare for Brexit and to enable organisations to face macro-economic volatility with confidence and resilience.

Much about the impact of Brexit is unknown, but 2018 should be the year in which the pace of preparation increases. To assist members, in 2018 the CIPR will:

- Work with members through scenario planning meetings (these will involve groups of professionals around the country developing scenarios for Brexit and public relations’ contribution to Brexit planning) and share the recommendations
- Offer a basic guide to Brexit, with regular updates on political activity as the date for the UK’s departure draws nearer, sharing key questions for professionals that arise from each significant development
- Signpost useful information, key business contacts, best practice from other sectors and commentary on the possible impacts of Brexit
- Offer more guidance on the role of public relations at Board level, including analysis of changes affecting corporate governance and support for public relations as the practice that develops comfort with, and confidence in operating in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous macro-economic environment
- Quarterly Brexit meetings with opportunities to network

Four things to do now

If you have not already done so, start the process of reviewing your client’s or employer’s Brexit preparedness. How ready are they? How robust are they? Use the CIPR Brexit Checklist.

1) Once you have identified what Brexit means for your employer or client – analyse how they can mitigate the risk or exploit the opportunities. Focus your thinking on the contribution that you, as a PR professional, can make.

2) Make Brexit part of your personal development plan for 2018 – upgrade your skills and increase your knowledge. Talk to other professionals – if you work along side HR, finance or legal professionals, what information can they share about the impact of Brexit that will enhance your understanding?

3) Develop your self-awareness. How resilient are you as a PR practitioner? How effective are you when operating in a volatile and uncertain environment? What can you do to build your confidence?

4) Reflect on your links to the leadership in any organisation you work for or with. Can you command their attention? Will they value your judgement on this subject? How can you get them to take your advice into consideration along with other professions represented at the boardroom table?