



OPINION

The pigeonhole that's trapping PR in the past

Research consistency shows a trend towards one-stop shop agencies or specialists. TrinityP3's Darren Woolley argues the PR label may be holding many agencies back.

DARREN WOOLLEY
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"PR" is a 20th-century job description that barely scratches the surface of the role today, argues Woolley

If you want to find a PR agency in 2026, you might need to stop looking under the "P" section of the directory.

According to our recent TrinityP3 2025 New Business Report, we are witnessing a fundamental "great agency realignment". But while the big networks are merging like galaxies in a slow-motion car crash, a more subtle tragedy is unfolding: the PR agency is being ghosted by its own name.

The data is clear: marketers and brands are hungry for specialists.

We have seen the share of unbundled PR and social pitches triple in 2025, jumping from 3.3% to a significant 9.1% of the service mix. On the surface, this looks like a win for the communications crowd. More pitches, more money, more lunch meetings, right?

Not exactly. The problem is that while marketers are increasingly unbundling these services from their "full service" generalist agencies to find "best-of-breed" partners, they aren't always looking in the direction of the traditional PR firms. Instead, the business is flowing toward agencies positioned as "social specialists," "influencer architects," or "content creators," and "earned-media specialists".

The problem with being pigeonholed

Marketers love a good pigeonhole. It makes the pitch list easier to manage. If you need someone to handle a crisis or draft a government submission, you call the PR agency. If you want to go viral on TikTok or manage a community of feral brand fans, you call the social agency.

The irony, of course, is that most modern PR or comms agencies are already offering brand-focused social content, influencer management, and experiential events as part of their standard kit. They've been doing "earned media" since before the first hashtag was born. Yet, because they are still labelled as "PR," they are often overlooked for the very services they pioneered.

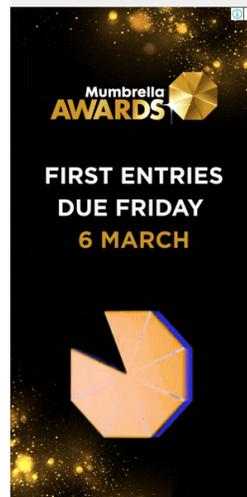
Meanwhile, the "specialists" are shamelessly encroaching on traditional PR territory. We're seeing social agencies like We Are Social move aggressively into reputation management, while creative agencies are now bolting on media relations, rebranded as "social amplification", to their service mix.

What the numbers tell us

The report also highlights a "barbell effect" in the industry. On one end, you have the mega-networks like Publicis Groupe, which consolidated a massive 21% share of the network media market after acquiring Atomic 212. On the other hand, independent agencies have surged from a 47% share of wins to a dominant 65%.



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This independent surge is a "clear client mandate for founder-led agility." But for an independent PR firm, that agility is being hamstrung by a 20th-century job description.



Darren Woolley: "As a PR agency owner, you should be asking why you're not sitting at the 'creative' table more often."

In 2025, independent agencies captured 77% of all non-media creative wins, yet the report notes that PR and social pitches are still being managed separately from master creative briefs.

If you're a PR agency owner, you should be asking why you're not sitting at the "creative" table more often. Proportional interest in creative services grew from 21% to 30% in just twelve months. If your agency is "just PR," you're effectively telling the market you don't do the "poetry"—you just handle the "pipes".

Redefine or resign

As we look ahead to 2026, the competitive edge won't be having an AI tool; everyone has one by now or is at least talking about it. The winner will be the agency with the most "integrated intelligence." For PR agencies, this means it's time to stop letting a convenient label do them a disservice.

There are three ways forward for the comms industry:

- **Collective Repositioning:** The PR industry needs to pull its finger out and educate the market that "brand" and "reputation" are now the same currency. In a social-first world, a PR agency isn't just about media relations; it's about managing the entire ecosystem of credibility
- **Redefine the actual business:** Move away from the "PR tag" and embrace a term that actually describes the work, whether that's "narrative strategy", "influencer architecture" or "corporate identity". Don't hide behind a two-letter acronym that marketers still associate with the dusty press release
- **The pure specialist route:** Alternatively, pick a lane and own it. Become the absolute best at one niche. Become famous for the discipline, not the category.

As our report noted, 2026 will see a "squeezed middle" whereby mid-sized agencies, which lack the massive data scale of the "big two" — Publicis and the merged Omnicom-IPG — or the razor-sharp focus of a specialist, will struggle.

PR agencies have the skills to lead this new era. They just need to realise that "PR" isn't what they do anymore: it's just a box they've allowed themselves to become trapped in.

It's time to break out.

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DARREN WOOLLEY

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James Duncan 19 Feb 26

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