

PR uncertainty around brand content and journalists

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A report by



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Introduction

A year ago we proposed a simple equation: Brands are increasingly creating content. To compete against both the quality that established media generate and the quantity produced by other brands, they must raise their game. They do that by employing the best content processes and people – (ex-)journalists. And those professional content creators – we call them 'brand journalists' here, for better or worse – will want to work with PRs.

“If we expected to see a gradual, uniform move towards acceptance of brand journalists by PRs, we were wrong.”

But do PRs want to work with brand journalists? That's the central question our research answers.

Last time around, [the PR community was split about 50:50](#) between those engaging with and even enjoying working with this growing cadre of content creators and those for whom brand journalists would always play second fiddle or – at worst – deserved little of their time because they couldn't see any upside.

What of this year? Our findings have been, in a word, mixed. Over the coming pages we'll share with you some of the details and our analysis, as well as why it matters. But if we expected to see a gradual, uniform move towards acceptance of brand journalists by PRs, we were wrong.

Sample

We surveyed 266 UK-based PR professionals, 69 of whom (that's 26 per cent) work in-house as opposed to at agencies or for themselves. This overall response was higher than a year ago by about 53 per cent but notably – and we'll touch upon this in our analysis – the proportion of those responding from in-house PR roles was higher: 26 per cent in 2016 versus 10 per cent in 2015.

We should also make clear that this was largely a new sample of PRs. Although there was some crossover, those we spoke to last time were in the minority.

Just the beginning

While content that is funded by a single corporate backer – as opposed to advertisers, subscriptions or the state – is nothing new, the level of content marketing activity we're now seeing is unprecedented.

“Those who have been journalists are in demand”

There are all kinds of reasons that organisations are creating content, and it takes many forms and goes by all kinds of names. But, undeniably, those who have been journalists are in demand. These are people ResponseSource and Collective Content know well. We think this trend is important – not just for these people's careers and the effectiveness of organisations' communications, as important as those things are – but because what's at stake is the quality of the information that society consumes.

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Whether you work in PR, in marketing, as a content creator of some type or in any related field, we'd love the chance to continue this conversation.

We also hope you'll find the following report valuable.



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Part 1: How PRs work with brand journalists

If there are more brand journalists, why don't PRs report hearing from them?

Last year we began by revealing how many of our respondents told us they had 'ever been contacted by someone creating content on behalf of a regular organisation' rather than working in the media.

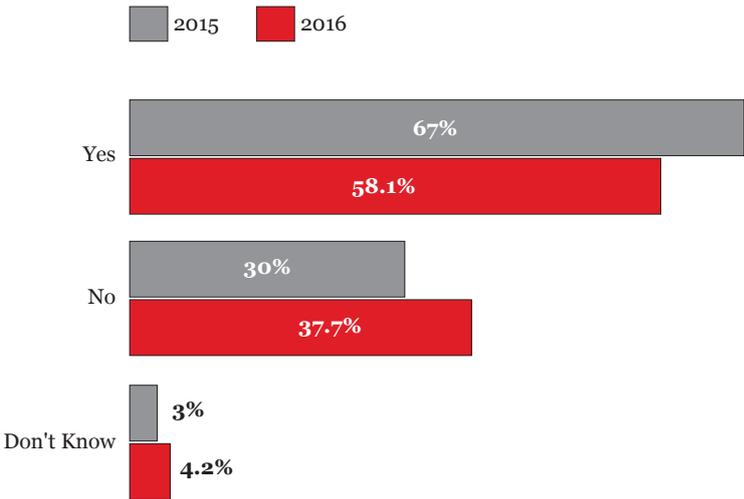
The reality, of course, is that the number is likely to be near 100 per cent. Only it's a matter of interpretation. If you receive a call or email from someone at BA's High Life publication, do you answer 'Yes' to our question or consider that person a regular journalist?

In 2015, two thirds of our sample answered 'Yes'. However, in 2016 the number had fallen to 58.1 per cent.

And it's not like we'd suddenly seen a large increase in the 'Don't knows'. In fact those who told us flat out 'No' – that they'd never had such contact – increased from 30 per cent last year to 37.7 per cent this year.

In short, this isn't the response we expected.

Fig (a) – Have you ever been contacted by someone creating content on behalf of a regular organisation – eg, a company or government department – rather than print/online/broadcast media?

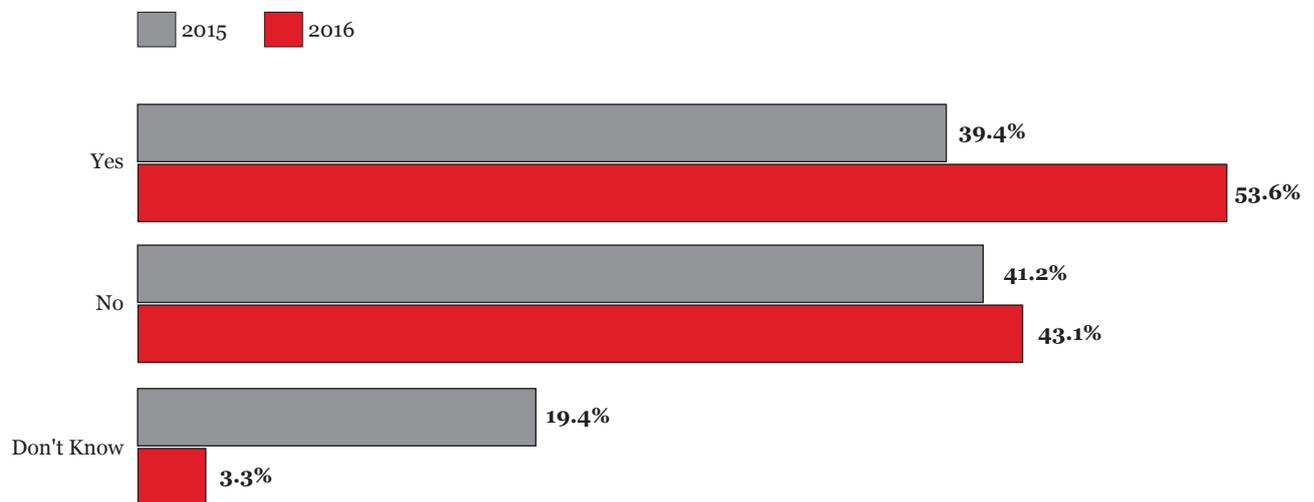


Brand journalists – separate but equal? Not yet.

So if PRs are telling us they're hearing less from non-media content creators – that is, those commissioned directly by companies – that means this whole content marketing trend has had its day, right? Not so fast.

Next up we asked part of our sample, those who had answered 'Yes' to the previous question, whether they 'treat brand enquiries in the same way as you would when contacted by media'. (We didn't include those who answered 'No' to the last question because they told us they don't get such enquiries.)

Fig (b) – Do you treat these enquiries in the same way as you would when contacted by media?



Our 'Don't knows' decreased, from 19.4 per cent in 2015 to just 3.3 per cent this year. But those who said 'Yes' increased from 39.4 per cent to 53.6 per cent. While that's a difference of only 14.2 percentage points, it's actually a rise of 36 per cent year on year.

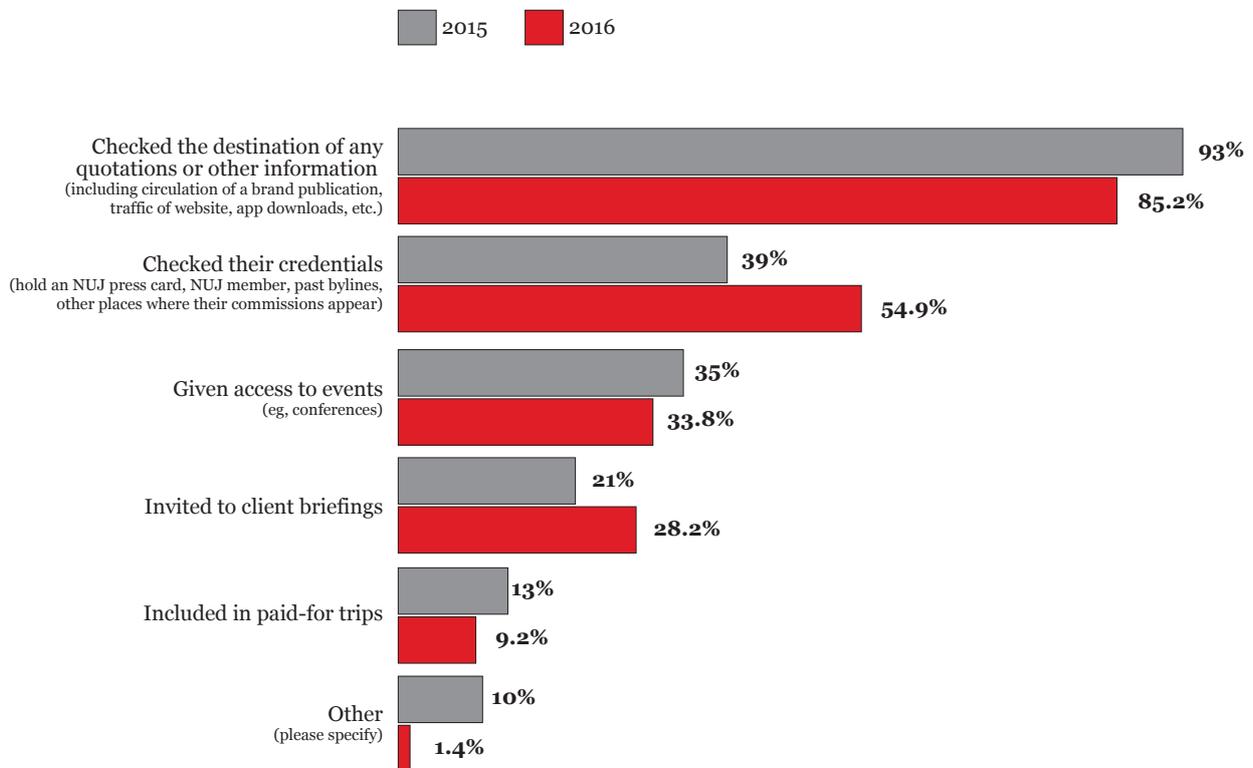
However, 57.9 per cent of PRs within agencies answered 'Yes' (66 out of 114 agency-only replies to that question) showing they are more willing to treat all enquiries the same.

“Show me your credentials”

Our next question, another one we asked a year ago, sought to find out the ways brand journalists are treated differently to traditional journalists.

As we pointed out last time, we would expect the following columns to hit 100 per cent if this were research about the ways PRs have ever worked with traditional journalists. But this is a comparison – and unlike the last question this one is based more on experience than opinion – getting to the heart of how accepted this newer breed of content creator is.

Fig (c) – Which of the following have you done, in relation to working with brand journalists? (choose as many answers as you like)



This is a mixed result. With the exception of the first and last columns, the activities are either static or up on last year.

“The short term looks worse but the long term looks more encouraging for brand content”

Our assumption is that higher percentages here are a sign of acceptance of brand journalists.

While the 'Other' category decreased, we didn't get much colour on why that was. One PR wrote in response to our 'please specify' request: "[Have] worked collaboratively on content and basically written stuff for them." Which isn't perhaps the kind of endorsement we were hoping for.

“The balance is no longer 50/50 but approximately 60/40 in favour of those accepting brand journalists.”

Do we still have a future together?

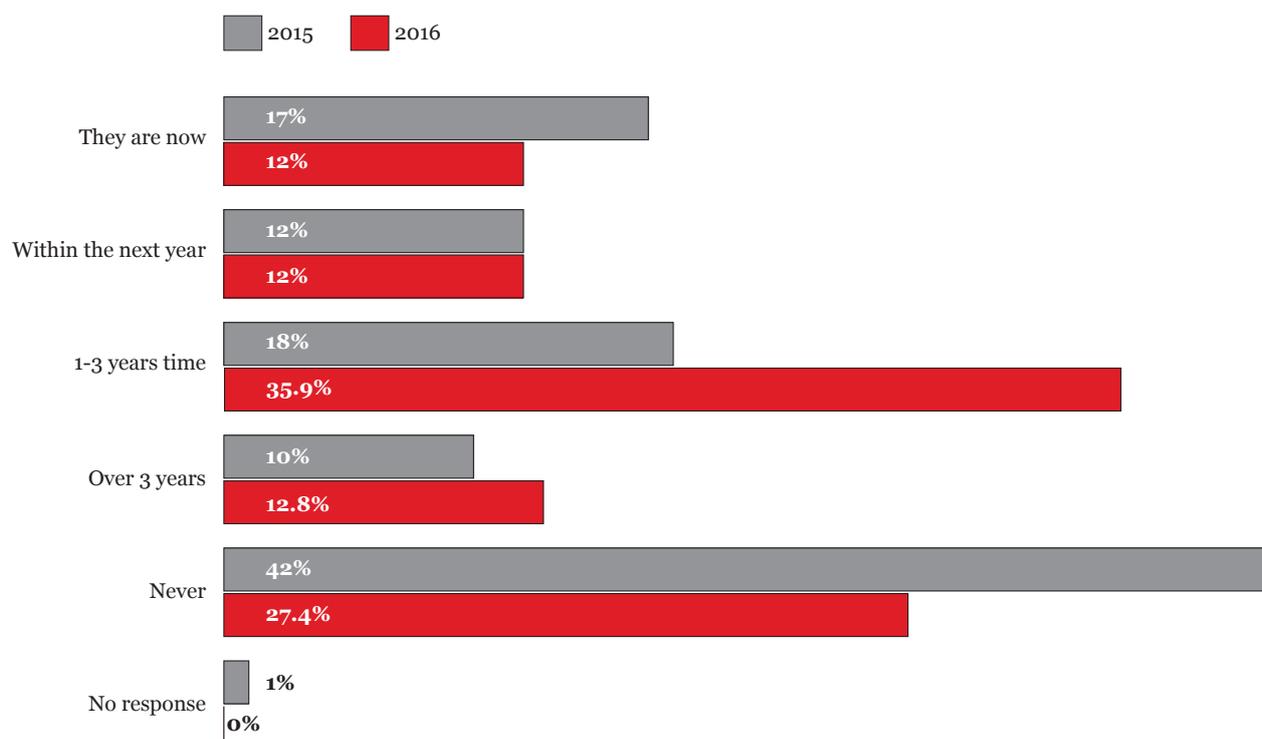
Last year, this part of the research was split evenly. Some would say it's the single most important part of this study, the crux of what we're trying to find out.

The question was: 'When do you think brand journalists will be treated on a par with traditional journalists?'

We arrived at that even split by grouping together those who had answered 'They are now' with those who said 'Within the next year' and '1-3 years time'. Then we compared that to the combined total of those who said 'Over 3 years' and 'Never'. The 'Don't knows' were negligible.

So what does this year tell us? Well, it's open to interpretation. In summary, the short term looks worse but the long term looks more encouraging for brand content creators and those funding their activity.

Fig (d) – When do you think brand journalists will be treated on a par with traditional journalists?



The numbers answering 'They are now' are down, at 12 per cent versus 17 per cent in 2015. Those saying 'Within the next year' are static at 12 per cent. However, those saying '1-3 years time' are up strongly at 35.9 per cent, while those telling us 'Never' are down strongly from 42 per cent in 2015 to 27.4 per cent in 2016.

“[T]raditional journalists are bound by a code of conduct and ethics which doesn't exist in brand journalism.”

This is encouraging for those who want this kind of content to have a viable long-term future. Comparing this year to the way we grouped results 12 months back and the split between progressives and refuseniks, we see the balance is no longer 50/50 but approximately 60/40 in favour of those accepting brand journalists.

But we also have to ask if our sample is 'kicking the can down the road'. Are they being honest and realistic about their long-term views on parity?

One respondent went on to tell us: "There will always be some degree of wariness from the agency side."

Another said: "[T]raditional journalists are bound by a code of conduct and ethics which doesn't exist in brand journalism."

We can see why these reasons would be cited by refuseniks.

However, on the flip side, a respondent said: "It will probably be that many lifestyle journos become more brand than anything else in the future. Look at Telegraph Travel, for example."

“Lifestyle journos become more brand than anything else in the future.”

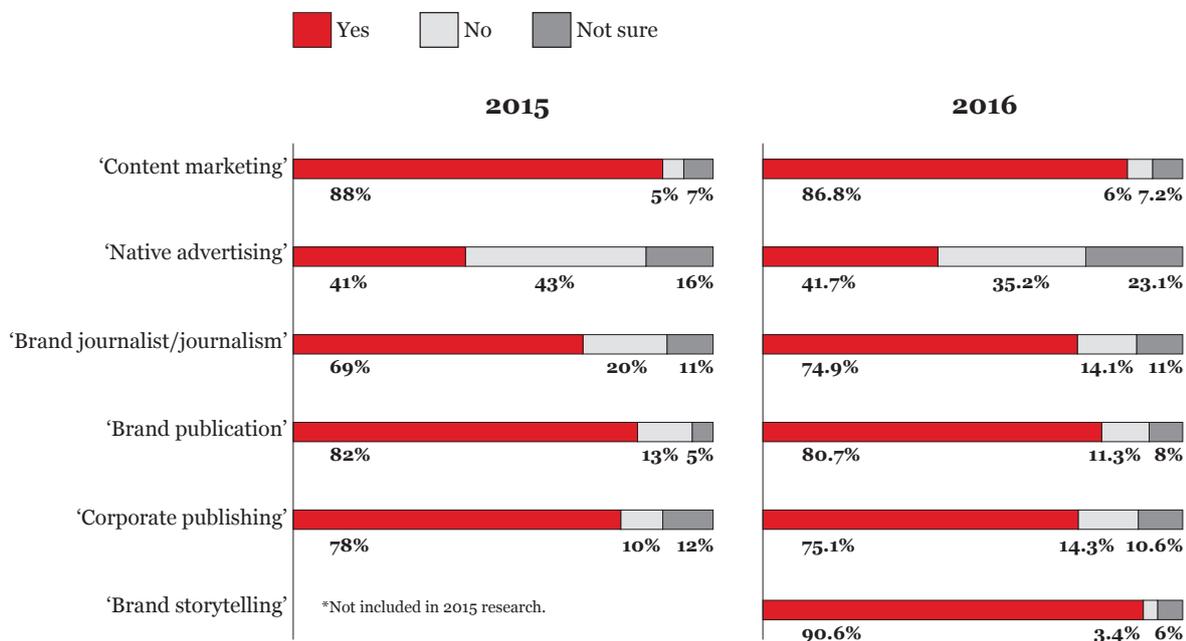
And we heard: "When they are permitted to write about a competitor in the brand publication they represent" – which is perhaps encouraging given brands such as Nissan started doing that a few years ago.

Part 2: Defining some terms

Although this is one of the first things we ask in our research, we're establishing a tradition of not analysing these findings first. For one thing, what you call something is less important than how you use it. For another, what we've reported so far is more interesting.

But the terms people use and are comfortable with tell their own stories. So what did we hear this time?

Fig (e) – Would you say you understand the following terms?



This was one of the areas where those working for PR agencies claimed more understanding of terms than their colleagues in in-house roles.

There was a significant increase in 'Don't knows' for 'native advertising', which has always been and maybe always will be a confusing discipline. But still, we'd expect major native ad initiatives at mainstream and trade publishers to have involved the PR community by now, with the best PRs and their clients seeing the value of getting coverage in some of these features. (See 'Guerrilla PR' box.) Some we know have been involved in decisions about which publications and formats to use.

Otherwise levels of comprehension either stayed about the same as 2015, for example for 'content marketing' or 'brand publication'. Or understanding increased, for example with 'brand journalist' as well as ever so slightly with 'native advertising'.

This was the first year we asked about '[brand storytelling](#)'. Perhaps unsurprisingly, for those working in PR – agency or in-house – awareness was strong. To some degree, PR has always been about brand storytelling. It received the highest proportion of 'Yes' answers and the fewest saying 'No'.

Out of the small number of those we heard from who aren't in PR, comprehension of every term was lower.

Guerrilla PR and brand content

Make no mistake – many of the brands represented by PRs we surveyed make use of both PR and content marketing. Last year, one respondent from a PR agency admitted to us that his client was pleased with his company's content efforts – though he wouldn't contribute to another company's.

That kind of thinking is short-sighted. Quality content contains many voices. In an answer to our question about when traditional journalists and brand journalists will be treated the same, one respondent told us: "When they are permitted to write about a competitor in the brand publication they represent."

Another negative comment we heard this year was: "I have had experience where a journalist failed to tell us they were writing brand content when invited to briefings and then used our content to make their client look good. Very poor form."

We don't know any more information about that case – for example, just how it made the journalist's client 'look good' or whether it disparaged or ignored the PR's client. But in a way all brand content reflects well on the organisation funding it. If that's the case, would PRs like this shy away from all engagement? Or is it just a case of brand journalists being open about their work? Or PRs doing their research?

And there is the question we're hearing more and more: What value is there in being placed in a competitor's expensive brand publication? It's early years for that kind of guerrilla activity but many brand journalists and content marketing agencies will be open to that approach as it gives content more credibility. But how many of their paymasters will see it that way and allow it?

Part 3: Why brand journalists are treated differently

Our research to this point shows that the brave new world – one that spans beyond journalism to where most content creators are now hired by brands in the name of content marketing and its related areas – leads to a range of reactions from PRs. But what reasons do they have, generally, for their different treatment?

We broached several of the main areas and also received some qualitative answers.

Like last year, the biggest misgiving PRs have about brand journalists is a conflict of interest between those paying for brand content and their own client's needs. But whereas last time that figure was mentioned by 54.5¹ per cent of PRs, this year 66.5 per cent cited 'conflict between those paying for the content and your own company/client'.

In fact, across the board the objections were at a higher level than they were 12 months ago.

One exception was when we stripped out the results from in-house PRs. For example, in 2015, 32 per cent of respondents cited 'Lack of details' – for example, the location or readership of a piece of content or brand publication is unknown to them, which wouldn't be the case with all but the most niche media outlets.

However, this year 'Lack of details' was cited by 55 per cent of all PRs (23 percentage points higher), yet by only 48 per cent of agency PRs. We cannot say why in-house PRs might, on average, be slightly more wary about brand journalists.

The idea that one brand benefits from writing about another is seemingly anathema to many of the PRs we surveyed.

Objections that came up in our open answer section included question marks over the size or influence of brand outlets (for example, 'Lower readership more often than not', 'Low page rank/reach' and 'The source isn't seen by audiences as independent and therefore as strongly as traditional media').

“The biggest misgiving about brand journalists is a conflict of interest”

This was arguably our most complete comment against the question of equal treatment:

"It completely depends on which brand. For example, [Specsavers magazine](#) would be perfect for many other brands, and often banks work with The Times. So it just depends on which brand. Some are now, some will be if their brand grows and some never will be."

¹This is an average of two answers from last year that we combined: 'Goals of those paying for the content' and 'Conflict of interest'.

Whose content is it anyway?

But perhaps the trickiest and most paradoxical objection we heard centred around 'attitudes of the client', more specifically helping the brand creating the content more so than a client's brand that is contributing.

This is paradoxical because if every organisation took the same view, brand content everywhere would never feature voices from other organisations. The quality of content would suffer.

“The best brand content can be a great place to have a client placed.”

This is also, in our view, a missed opportunity. The best brand content, from [a native advertising long-read in the New York Times](#) or other high-quality outlet to brand publications such as Amex's [OpenForum](#) or Net-a-porter's [Porter magazine](#), is entertaining or useful (or both) to those consuming it and can be a great place to have a client placed.

Similarly – and this is cutting edge – the company whose voice is heard on a rival's pages could be seen to be carrying out the ultimate guerrilla marketing. (See box out.) Who's making use of whom in that example? The most satisfactory answer is that all sides win.

Part 4: What happens next?

This year's results show that there is no single path for brand content and the role PRs will play in its evolution. In some respects the creation of quality content by brands, with the help of PRs, looks rosier than a year ago; in others, as money is invested, so too potential conflicts are made apparent and the bar set higher.

What's certain outside of this report is that there is more and more money being invested in this area. And there are more trained journalists who are writing for companies instead of the media, either out of choice – sometimes finding a way to wear both hats simultaneously – or necessity, with full-time editorial positions being cut in much of the media world.

“PRs who don't rate brand publishers at the moment will be contacted more in coming years. Ignoring this trend isn't an option.”

That means that even PRs who don't rate brand publishers at the moment will be contacted more in coming years. Ignoring this trend isn't an option.

One PR told us there needs to be more success stories such as the WSJ's [Cocainenomics](#), which promoted a Netflix original series about drug tsar Pablo Escobar but was a great piece of content in its own right (in the style of the NYT's famous [Snowfall](#) uber-feature).

The truth is that there are plenty of such examples already out there. However, we'd argue that the ratio of those to the noise that many brands are creating (and in doing so delivering little value) has to improve.

PRs can help make that happen, we are convinced.

Methodology

We had 309 respondents from the ResponseSource database during the month of February 2016. Of these, 266 were in PR, with 197 (74%) at agencies and the remaining 69 (26%) in-house. The other 43 were not in PR but often in related fields such as marketing roles. The focus of this report is on the PR community in the UK.



Collective Content is a content marketing agency. Our network of writers, designers and videographers produces media-grade content, so companies can have better conversations with their customers.



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ResponseSource provides easy-to-use tools that connect PR professionals and businesses to journalists, enabling them to give stories relevant coverage – quickly and easily.