

..... TRAVEL PUBLIC RELATIONS

IN THE ERA OF COVID-19

APRIL 7, 2020



INSPIRING TRAVEL
THROUGH RESPONSIBLE JOURNALISM



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Travel in 2020 is at a standstill and the tourism industry has taken a massive hit, from airlines and cruise companies to hotels and destination marketing organizations themselves. In late March 2020, SATW and Development Counsellors International (DCI) teamed up to conduct a study of the perceptions of travel public relations professionals who are in the thick of this storm.

Through an online survey of SATW associate members, the study sought to understand how travel public relations professionals in both the U.S. and Canada have been coping with the global pandemic. A total of 138 respondents completed the survey, with a breakdown of the players shown below. The responses of destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and PR firms help to provide invaluable insight into what travel PR professionals are thinking and dealing with during this unprecedented global crisis.

When we enter a post-COVID-19 world, travel public relation efforts will be key in helping all of these entities – in addition to travelers themselves – regain the confidence and hope needed to spur an industry rebound.



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Breakdown of Respondents

Destination



Public Relations Firm



Accommodation



Other



Travel Industry (airline, tour operator)



SATW Chapter Member Regions

Eastern



Western



Central States



Canadian



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KEY FINDINGS

#1 . Certain of Uncertainty:

Most PR efforts are on hold and there is little consensus about when press trips and influencer programs will begin again. It should be noted that 45% of respondents did not even offer an estimate on a forecasted timeframe for recovery. Despite the uncertainty, 27% reported that Q3 may be an option, should it become responsible to travel at that time, signaling recovery efforts in the fall may be the strongest possibility.

#2 Pitching, a Bit:

Nearly half of PR professionals reported still pitching to the media, though the angles and stories vary from COVID-19 resiliency stories to more ambitious pitches about summer travel. Keeping destinations top of mind when the travel industry does return to "normal" remains important for more than half of PR professionals, even if efforts won't translate to direct business in the near future.

#3 Day by Day:

When asked about their day-to-day activities, PR professionals on the whole reported dealing with more internal, destination-specific issues. Smaller percentages were looking to either local or regional/national media for outreach, but in general, professionals were moderately interested in pushing virtual experiences that, in normal conditions, would be less interesting. The major takeaway is that much of what PR professionals usually do has been slowed due to the COVID-19 crisis, but they are using the luxury of time to work on internal housekeeping and other projects.



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#4 On Pause:

A major and unsurprising finding that this study presents is how much budget cuts and layoffs are affecting PR agencies. For external agencies hired by DMOs, more than half have asked agencies to pause or slow work, cutting budgets at varying degrees. Still, 45%, did not yet cut any budgets, offering a glimmer of hope for travel PR during the upcoming recovery period that the tourism industry will eventually be entering.

#5 Size Matters:

The research looked more closely at DMOs who hired external PR agencies. When it comes to budget cuts and reducing PR agency engagement, larger DMOs are more readily cutting budgets by more than half (75%). DMOs with more than 100 workers noted halting external PR agency work by up to 100%, while smaller DMOs tended to retain their external teams.

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STATE OF PRESS TRIPS

What's clear first and foremost is that press trips are on hold for the majority of PR professionals, and they aren't sure when to start up again. Nearly half (45%) of respondents, for example, don't know when they'll be starting press trips and digital influencer programs again. Some are hopeful that May and June will be likely, and more than a quarter (27%) are looking to Q3 2020, but uncertainty seems to be the only thing most PR professionals are sure of when it comes to being able to start up again.

This uncertainty is no doubt due to the fact that restrictions and governmental guidelines have not yet stipulated when travel will be permitted again (as of early April 2020). These major components of travel PR efforts, therefore, are not yet part of the recovery efforts, at least not fully. While PR teams are aware that press trips and influencer programs will be needed, they aren't actively setting dates yet.

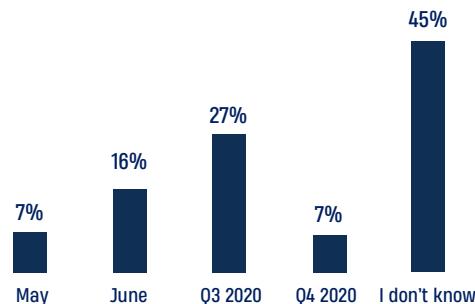
Interestingly, larger organizations with 100 or more employees are more hopeful that recovery efforts in the form of press trips will occur in June (21%), Q3 (21%) or Q4 (21%). This group presented the least uncertainty among organizations of different sizes, suggesting that larger organizations may be better prepared to weather the storm and get back to business sooner – or at least they feel that way.



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Visiting journalist programs and digital influencer programs are shutting down nationwide. At this time, when are you envisioning commencing these programs again?



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CURRENT MEDIA PITCH THEMES

While budgets may have been slashed, 45% of PR professionals continue to pitch to the media. It may be an uphill battle, but the strategy seems to be twofold. Timely topics like COVID-19 resiliency angles (53%) seem the most popular choice of pitch topic, while other timely angles like travel news (14%) are less popular.

Instead, PR professionals seem more interested in pitching more evergreen – or at least less timely – pieces like lifestyle (26%) and personality-driven stories (24%). At the same time, 19% of respondents chose “other,” most of which related to virtual travel experiences (equaling 14% of total responses). These results suggest that PR professionals are still trying to emphasize how individuals can interact and engage with a destination or experience while not traveling there directly.

Additionally, it seems that some PR professionals are preparing for the future, looking to set the stage for recovery. Among respondents, 29% are still pitching stories for fall travel while 17% are pitching summer story ideas. This shows that nearly half of PR professionals are feeling hopeful about returning to business as usual in the near future.

Are you currently pitching any editorial angles to media?



What angles are you pitching to media?
(Choose all that apply)



*Virtual travel was not on the original list of responses but appeared as a write-in response to “other (please specify)” frequently enough to warrant a new breakout in the chart



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LIMITED NEED FOR FREELANCE CONTENT

While 16% of PR professionals will consider purchasing freelance writing for their blogs or websites in the coming quarter, 50% responded stated they will "never" purchase content. However, the primary reason for noting "never" is because, historically, their content is created in-house. Among those that do outsource content writing, the data shows that PR agencies and DMOs will not be hiring – not soon at least – new content creators.

When do you anticipate purchasing any travel freelance writing (for your blog, website or other material)?

Within the next month



2%

Within the next quarter



16%

Q3, 2020



2%

Q4, 2020



7%

2021



2%

Don't know



12%

Never



50%

Other



9%

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DAY TO DAY ACTIVITY

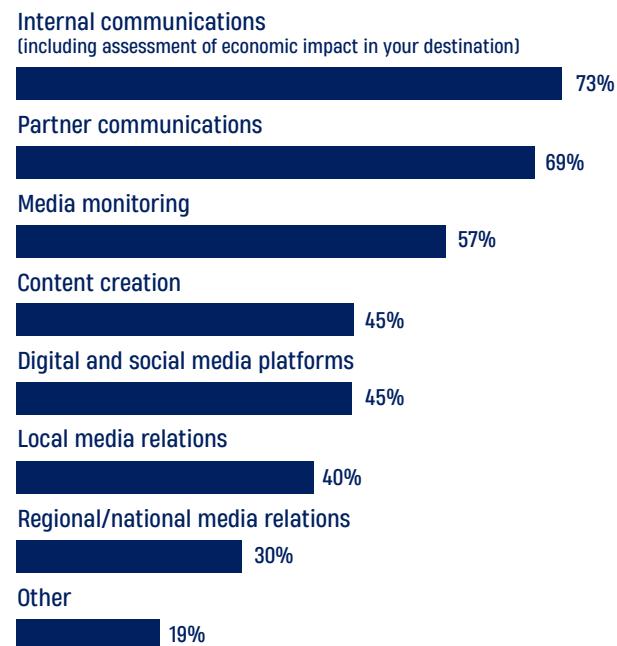
With decreased media relations activity across the board, PR professionals are still staying busy. Most (73%) spend time on internal communications, analyzing the economic impact on their destinations. These activities extend to partner communications (69%) to assess these impacts further.

When it comes to external communications, 45% of PR professionals are creating content to keep trade and consumers informed of what's going on in their destination. On the whole, however, external media relations has taken a backseat, with 40% looking to the local media and only 30% looking to regional or national media. Still, 45% are applying work hours to their social media platforms, where they can maintain lines of communications with all audiences interested in their destination.

The takeaway here is that many PR professionals, both in-house and agency, are reducing their media-facing endeavors during this time. In the coming weeks and months, of course, these activities will take more of a prominent position in the day-to-day workflow, but during such a global crisis, PR professionals are looking inward to take care of local partners or internal housekeeping required while travel is largely on pause.

What is currently taking up your day?

(Choose all that apply)



As far as other activities, responses ranged from cleaning up websites to crisis management and other crisis communication (28%), activities that will slow once the COVID-19 crisis passes.



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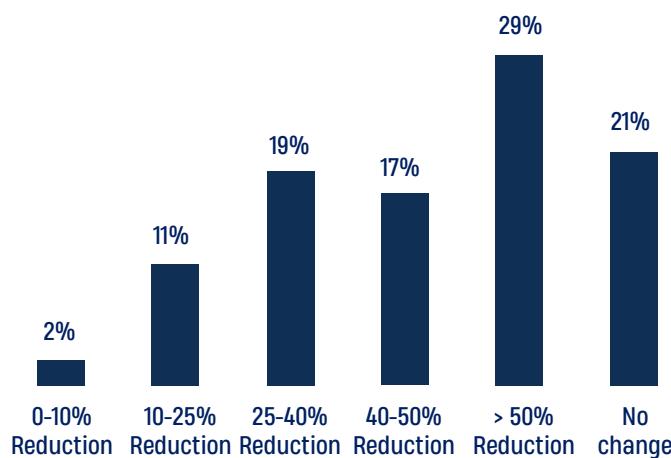
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BUDGET WOES

When asked about their budgets, PR professionals reported significant reductions to their budgets, with only 21% reporting no change. More than half the respondents noted losing more than 25% of their budget, while 29% have lost more than half of their entire budget. It's clear that lowered PR budgets will be a major factor during recovery efforts after the COVID-19 crisis subsides.

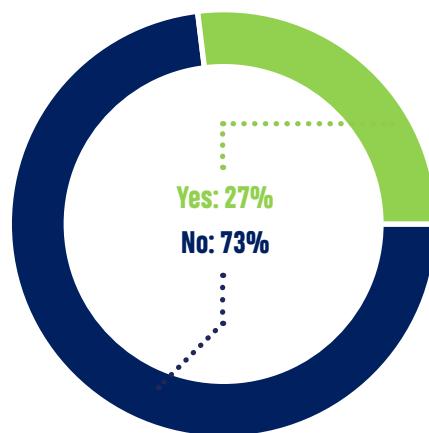
How is your public relations budget being impacted to date?



A closer look, however, reveals what this all means for PR agencies. For destinations without an internal PR team we asked if they hire an outside PR agency, and 45% said they do. Of this 45%, nearly half (48%) said they have asked their agencies to pause work for the moment. At first glance, this might seem like a daunting statistic, but 45% of respondents within this segment also said they have not reduced budgets for PR agencies, signaling hope and investment in the future for recovery efforts.

Many PR agencies were impacted however, with 24% of destinations slashing budgets by more than 50%, so while there are glimmers of hope, there is also the hard truth in these results. Some agencies will take big hits because of the COVID-19 crisis and some will not immediately be part of recovery efforts – at least not with full teams. So far, 27% of respondents reported that positions at their agencies have been eliminated or furloughed. Real jobs are lost and real human lives are affected in ways beyond the virus itself, and these results are a clear and sobering indication of that fact.

Are positions at your organization being furloughed or eliminated?



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BIG VS LITTLE

One thing that the tables do not reveal immediately is that the size of the DMOs studied actually underscore important differences in approaches to PR. A closer look at the data reveals that most of these budgetary cuts have been happening at larger organizations with more employees. Smaller organizations, with less than 20 employees, have not as aggressively asked their PR agencies to halt. In fact, these smaller organizations, likely relying more on their PR agencies, have mostly asked for no changes at all. This finding suggests that larger organizations will likely find it easier to sacrifice their PR agencies than smaller organizations who need PR agencies to survive.

When looking at how much budgets have been cut, again, larger organizations seem to be more actively reducing PR agency work than smaller organizations who might not have the staff to fill gaps in PR work. According to the data, 100% of large organizations with 100+ employees (while a small sample of overall respondents) have cut PR funding by more than 50% (75% of respondents) and the remaining cut between 25%-50%. By contrast, among organizations with less than ten employees, 67% report cutting by less than 10%.

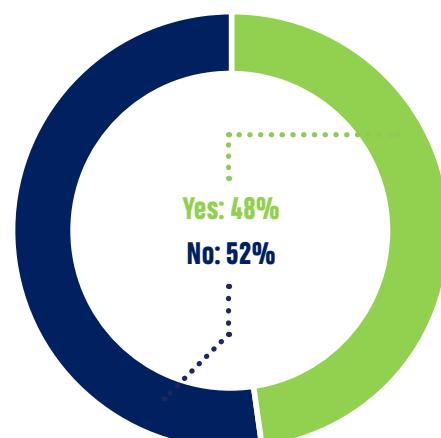
These findings might seem counterintuitive, but they underscore how important PR agencies are to smaller organizations who do not have sizeable teams. Despite being an added cost, this research suggests that the value provided by PR agencies to smaller organizations is more important than in larger organizations because of a lack of talent within the smaller organizations to absorb certain PR-related endeavors.



If you aren't a PR agency, Do you have a public relations agency?



Have you asked your public relations agency to pause their work on your behalf?



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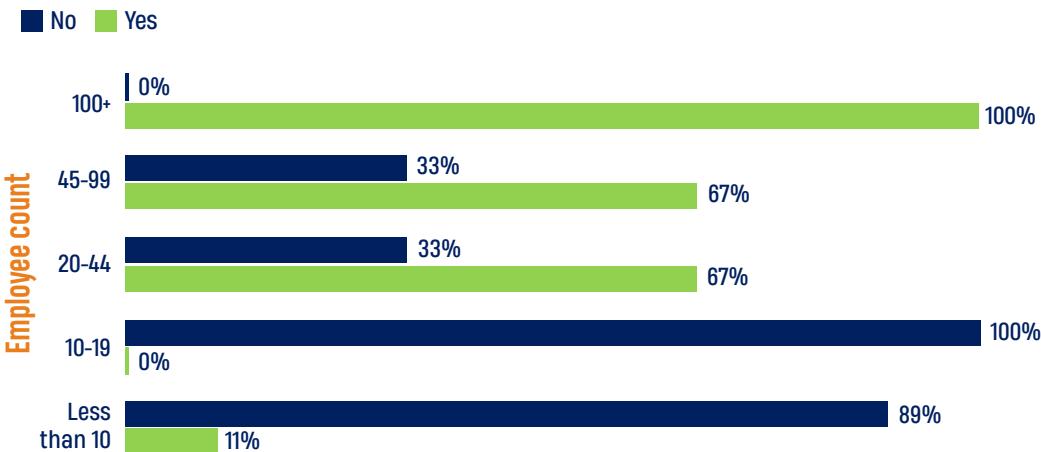
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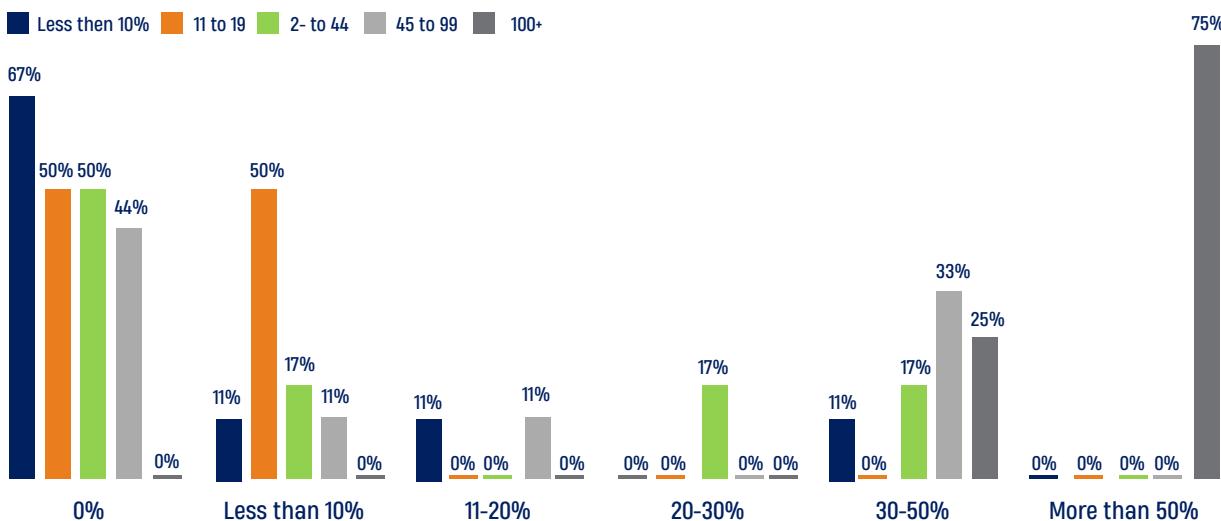
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Respondents who have asked PR agencies to pause work broken down by employee count



Level of reduced public relations agency's budget broken down by employee count



Moving forward, PR agencies will clearly still play some role in helping destinations and tourism industry partners with recovery efforts following the COVID-19 crisis. The precise role, much like the exact role of travel PR professionals in general during this crisis, is a moving target.

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SATW MISSION: TO INSPIRE TRAVEL THROUGH RESPONSIBLE JOURNALISM

SATW is a professional organization comprised of the travel industry's most experienced journalists, photographers, editors, broadcast/video/film producers, bloggers, website owners, public relations experts and hospitality industry representatives from the United States, Canada and beyond. Founded in 1955, SATW has more than 1,000 members. Our members are content creators that contribute to some of the most influential print, digital and broadcast platforms. Our members are also travel and hospitality brands and the public relations agencies that represent them. SATW is

the premier networking organization bringing all of those professions together. Since all applicants must agree to the organization's Code of Ethics policies SATW is able to maintain the highest level of professional excellence among its members.

To learn more about SATW, visit: satw.org

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Development Counsellors International (DCI) is the expert in how North American travelers and business executives select destinations. We partner with destinations to increase visitor arrivals, disperse visitors, augment daily spend and increase business investment. Since 1960, we have worked with more than 500 cities, regions, provinces, states and countries from our offices in Canada and the United States.

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