

Peter Hughes
State Services Commissioner & Head of State Services
State Services Commission
PO Box 329
Wellington 6140

26 March 2018

Dear Mr Hughes

I am writing to you to ask the State Services Commission to change how it reports on the numbers of public servants, specifically public relations and communications professionals, in the context of a cap on those numbers.

For some years now, public relations has been the only profession that has its numbers reported on in the New Zealand public sector: other support, or back-office functions such as human resources, legal, and finance, are not similarly reported.

PR and communications is therefore perceived as somehow less desirable, or more in need of watching. Each time the numbers are reported, media attention is drawn to public relations, and to no other profession as in the recent *Stuff* headline "Public Sector PR staff numbers grew 15% in National's final days".

There is no way for the public to know whether other professions grew similarly, or indeed more, because the numbers are not reported by the State Services Commission.

I worked for fifteen years in the public sector, and sat on the Heads of Communications group for nine of those years as Director Public Affairs for the Food Safety Authority and Director Communications for Customs. During that time, the group sought to place structure around the communications function, at the behest of the SSC, to reassure our employers about the professionalism and value of communications to the public sector. That job is now done, and the time for calling the value of our profession into question is long past.

It is well accepted that Government has a higher obligation to inform and consult. The public, in their growing need for immediate and more information, and their evolved right to determine how public services are delivered and how they communicate with government agencies, drive the legitimate need for communications professionals. Similarly, the media continue to demand fast turnaround times for information, and high standards of openness and communication from the public sector.

The roles of PR and communications people are much broader than simply pumping information out. Staff work on strategic and operational matters that includes: advising the executive team, issues management, crisis planning, OIA requests, working with HR on internal communications and culture, website content, videos, printed materials, events, public presentations, stakeholder engagement and consultation, media relations, social media and monitoring.

As SSC may be best placed to know, counting heads is not a measure of performance – it's an input. There's no evidence PR and communications outcomes are lacking – in fact there's plenty of evidence to the contrary as can be evidenced by the case studies entered in the annual PRINZ Awards, including many by your own public sector organisations.

I urge you to either start reporting on all other back office functions or remove the selective reporting on communications FTEs, so that there is an even playing field, and our profession is not singled out for negative attention that can damage our reputation as PR and Communications professionals.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Katie Mathison". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Katie Mathison
President, Public Relations Institute of New Zealand

About PRINZ

The Public Relations Institute of New Zealand is the membership organisation for professional public relations and communication practitioners. It represents more than 1500 individuals from across New Zealand. PRINZ members commit to an internationally recognised code of ethics. Key principles in the code include honesty, professionalism and balancing openness and privacy. Our code of ethics states that our members will 'promote open communication in the public interest wherever possible.'