

The Gender Say Gap

Despite outnumbering the men, women in PR earn an average of 21% less

Why aren't there more female spokespeople and commentators? It's up to the PR community to sort it out

BY CLAIRE MASON

Gender equality is having a moment. Last year was the centenary of women's suffrage, but earlier this year mandatory reporting revealed that the gender pay gap has actually worsened at many large companies over the past 12 months.

This is a symptom of a much bigger issue – the 'Gender Say Gap', as women remain invisible in many parts of business and public life. The absence of women's voices, ideas and insights is the elephant in every room – in the newsroom, where women write and feature in just a fraction of the news; in the conference room, where male speakers and panellists consistently outnumber women; and in the cutting room, given the underrepresentation of women in the director's chair. In a world where even Hollywood's leading ladies lack parity of dialogue, what are we teaching the next generation about women's right to speak?

I witness the absence of women as expert thinkers every day, particularly as spokespeople for their organisations. As professional communicators, we have a critical role to play in mobilising women as subject-matter experts for the clients and organisations we represent.

We can make a huge difference to the next generation by considering how organisations and the media portray women. Consider the frequent use of the word "businessmen" to mean "business people".

Man Bites Dog's analysis shows that businessmen are 2.5x more likely to be described in the media alongside government discussions and official processes – where, like 'statesmen', 'businessmen' is frequently used to mean 'business people'.

Businesswomen are mentioned alongside family and mothering roles 1.5x more often than men, but businessmen are almost never described as being fathers. What's more, businesswomen are 3.5x more likely to be patronisingly described as 'young' or 'up-and-coming'. Female CEOs are spoken about as being pioneers 7x more often than men.

Of course, times are changing, but it's slow progress. Some public figures such as London Mayor Sadiq Khan have refused to participate in un-diverse panels, and the media is becoming more self-aware, with the BBC's 50:50 project calling for gender balance among expert contributors.

Claire Mason is CEO of thought leadership consultancy Man Bites Dog.

Men are 4x more likely to be conference speakers

SO WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT IT?

Audit the Gender Say Gap

Whether you're a consultant or part of an in-house team, assess the corporate brand, marketing and PR footprint of the organisation you represent to compare the diversity of its public profile with that of its workforce and customer base. You can benchmark the Gender Say Gap against competitors and aspirational peers as part of your effort to become a leader.

Women hold just 32% of board positions at FTSE 100 firms

Male experts outnumber women three to one on BBC News at 10

2 Set bold goals
Companies can set business and brand targets to narrow their Gender Say Gap and ensure the diversity agenda is sponsored at the highest level. If you're on the agency side, you can set the goal of closing the Gender Say Gap and championing diversity in all your client communications.

3 Create an expert development programme to unleash new speakers and thinkers
Create a development programme to build the confidence and capability of experts from a range of diverse groups and inspire them to step forward as expert ambassadors for their organisations.

4 Use the talent already present in your marketing and corporate communications teams
There are many senior women within marketing and public relations across all industries whose capabilities as expert spokespeople are often overlooked. Next time you struggle to find a female leader for a panel or media interview, look no further than yourself and your team.

5 Say no to all-male panels – 'manels'
Use your influence to disrupt panels and conference agendas that lack diversity. Proactively offer spokespeople from diverse groups within your own agency or your clients' businesses.

6 Make women more visible in documents
Examine the stock images that you use to promote expert aspiration, from business leaders to entrepreneurs and scientists. Who is in the picture, who's in the middle and who's holding the pen or the laptop? Each image subtly conveys who is in charge.

Sources: *The Silent Sex: Gender, Deliberation and Institutions*, by Christopher Tarpowitz and Tali Mendelberg (Princeton University Press, 2014); Bizzabo Gender Diversity and Inclusion Report 2018; The Pudding's study of film dialogue in 2,000 screenplays broken down by gender and age (2016); Man Bites Dog research into gender comparisons of businessmen and businesswomen (June 2019); PRCA PR and Communications Census (2018); Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (July 2019)