

DIGITAL 24



The Certainty Framework

A Clear Approach to PR in 2026

Why PR Feels Harder **Right Now**

Earned media is more competitive than it was even a few years ago. Journalist response rates are down. AI has increased output, but also noise and scepticism. Leadership scrutiny is higher, while tolerance for uncertainty is lower.

At the same time, teams are being asked to move faster, deliver defined outcomes, and justify decisions with greater rigour, often with fewer resources and tighter budgets.



Industry research* now reflects what many teams are experiencing day-to-day. 72% of PR professionals cite low journalist response rates, and 62% report shrinking media lists in relevant beats. Only 2% say earning coverage has not become harder.

PR teams are under pressure because expectations, risk tolerance, and operating conditions have shifted. This framework is intended to help teams respond to those conditions deliberately, with clearer judgement and firmer footing.

The Expectation Gap

One of the biggest sources of pressure in the industry right now is expectation. PR is still often positioned as predictable, while leadership expectations around certainty and reassurance remain unchanged.

Teams are asked to be more agile without being given the infrastructure required to support that agility. This creates an expectation gap:

 Teams are expected to deliver confidence

 While operating in environments that are increasingly uncertain

When expectations are misaligned, even strong work carries disproportionate risk. Much of the pressure felt in PR today stems from this gap, not from a lack of effort or expertise.

What's expected

VS

What's controllable

67% of PR professionals* believe producing measurable results is now the primary way to increase perceived value with leadership, far outweighing creative output or visibility alone.

The **Control** Boundary

PR strategies should start by being explicit about control boundaries. Risk increases when teams are judged on factors outside their control, or when strategies rely on assumptions rather than defined parameters. Making this boundary clear reduces exposure immediately.

Within Your Control

How your story is distributed

Release timing

The type of placement you pursue

The standards and transparency of execution

The expectations set internally

Outside Your Control

Journalist decisions

News cycles

Competing stories

External sentiment

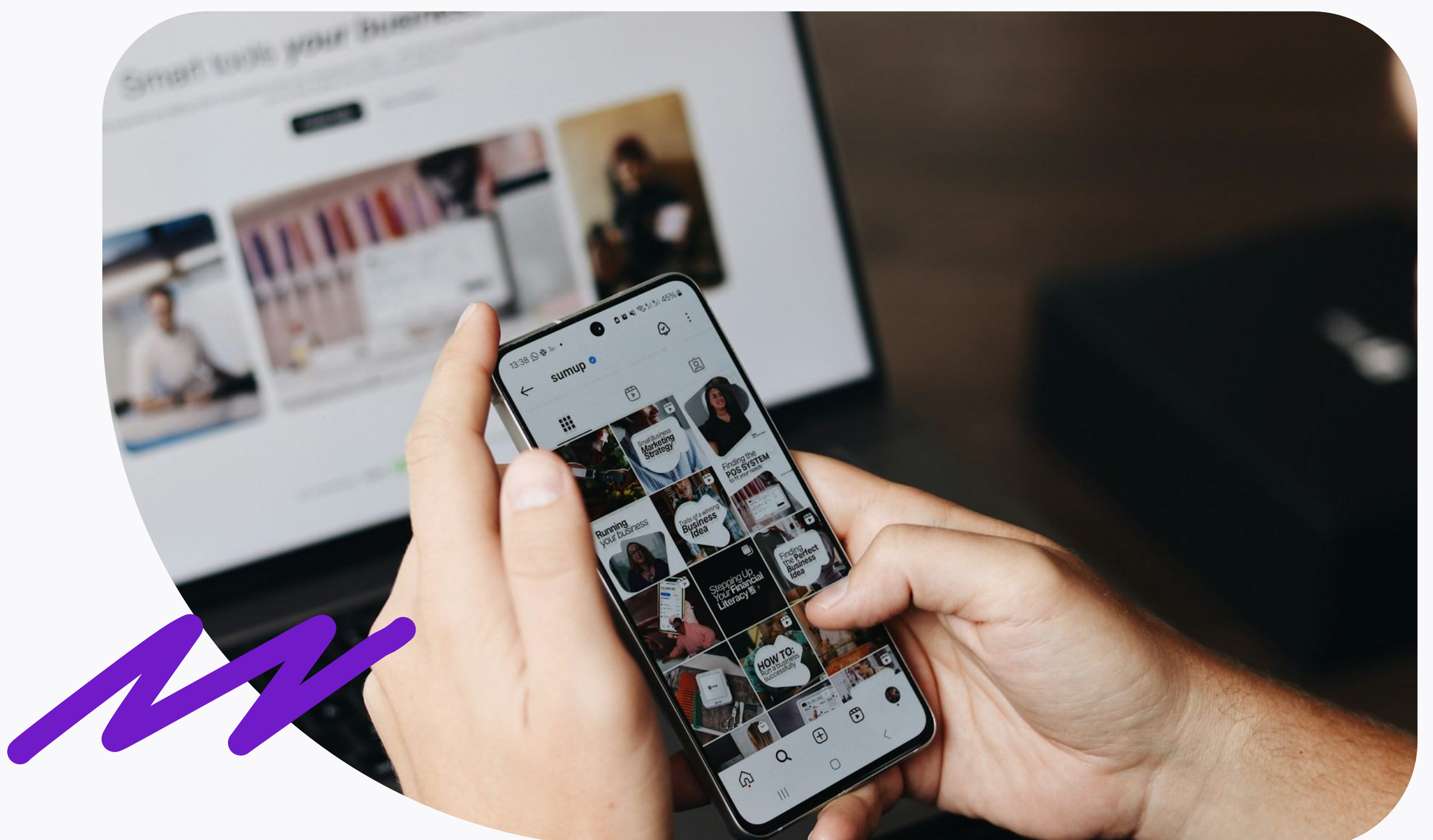
Whether earned coverage materialises consistently

Why Speed Alone Isn't the Answer

Speed is often treated as the solution to PR pressure. In reality, speed without structure only increases risk. Rushed decisions create rework. Undefined routes slow approvals. Last-minute changes undermine confidence.

True agility is not about moving fast all the time, it is about being ready when timing actually matters.

Agility comes from preparation, defined options, and decision paths teams can explain and stand behind.



The **Certainty** Ladder

Different PR moments require different levels of certainty. The strongest PR strategies recognise this and choose deliberately, rather than defaulting to a single approach. The key is to blend these approaches rather than pretending one solves everything.

Certainty comes from choosing the appropriate level of certainty for each moment.

Earned Media

Highest credibility · Lowest certainty

Best used when timing is flexible and outcomes can vary.

Structured Distribution

Moderate certainty · Scalable reach

Best used when timing matters and visibility needs to be dependable.

Guaranteed Placements

Highest certainty · Defined outcomes

Best used when approvals, launches, or stakeholder expectations require confidence.

Agility With Control

Teams move fastest when decisions are easy to explain and defend.

When distribution routes are clearly defined, approvals happen faster. When outcomes are labelled honestly, risk reduces. When options are transparent, hesitation disappears.

Agility becomes a capability, not a scramble. This is what allows teams to act quickly without disruption, and confidently without over-promising.



Recent research* shows that 58% of PR teams cite resource pressure as a leading challenge today, with 34% expecting it to become their single biggest constraint heading into 2026, ahead of media disruption or AI adoption.

Priorities & Trade Offs

Winning teams prioritise definition over speed and judgement over volume. They set expectations early, make trade-offs explicit, and choose credibility when it matters most. Leading with certainty means:

-  Addressing trade-offs directly
-  Setting expectations early and clearly
-  Reducing uncertainty rather than amplifying it
-  Prioritising credibility over momentum

This way of operating supports confidence where it is most needed: in decision-making, approvals, and accountability.



AI adoption is now near-universal in PR workflows. 77% of PR professionals report using generative AI tools, primarily to increase output. At the same time, earned media predictability continues to decline, reinforcing the need for more deliberate distribution decisions.

Implications for Your PR Strategy

The Certainty Framework is a decision-making model for PR teams operating under scrutiny, pressure, or time constraints. It helps teams determine where flexibility is acceptable and where certainty must be designed in, so decisions can be made quickly, explained clearly, and defended confidently.

Rather than asking what's possible?, the framework asks more useful questions:

Timing

Where does timing materially affect the outcome, relevance, or risk?

Credibility

Where is credibility non-negotiable, and where is flexibility acceptable?

Stakeholder Impact

Which outcomes matter most to leadership, clients, or procurement in this context?

Decision Friction

Where is progress slowing due to ambiguity, indecision, or undefined options?

The answers determine where earned media is appropriate, and where defined distribution, structured speed, or guaranteed outcomes are required.

The Certainty Framework

The Certainty Framework is built on a simple principle: certainty is designed, not assumed.

PR decisions become defensible when teams are intentional about three variables:

 **Control:** what must be known in advance

 **Timing:** when speed materially affects outcomes

 **Distribution:** how visibility is delivered and explained

The framework allows teams to deliberately blend earned, distributed, and guaranteed media without re-educating stakeholders or resetting expectations each time.

The Framework in Practice

A PR strategy built with certainty includes:

-  **Defined distribution routes**
So teams can explain where a story is going and why — internally and externally.
-  **Transparent pricing**
Fixed, visible costs that remove uncertainty from approvals and procurement.
-  **Clear labelling and editorial standards**
Ensuring all coverage can withstand scrutiny and aligns with brand and compliance expectations.
-  **Structured speed**
The ability to act quickly within predefined parameters, not reactive guesswork.

Certainty is only as strong as the systems that support it.

When distribution infrastructure is clear, labelled, and predictable, teams spend less time defending decisions, and more time executing confidently, even under pressure.

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**Research referenced from industry research The State of PR 2025 (Muck Rack) Inside PR 2026 (Cision).*