

# Misconceptions and Myths About Public Relations: Challenges Faced By Practitioners

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## **Abstract**

*Public Relations is so pervasive that it affects everyone that has anything to do with or comes in contact with other human beings. All of us, in one way or the other, practice public relations daily. According to Prca (2013), public relation is all about reputation. It is the result of what you do, what you say, and what others say about you. It is used to gain trust and understanding between an organisation and its various publics. Prca further states that for an organisation, every action and inaction is a public relations event. This is because what an organisation does or fails to do registers with its publics and creates an image of the organisation in the minds of its publics. Prca's position suggests that public relations is a profession wholly devoted to the service of humanity.*

## **Introduction**

Black (1989) asserts that many people seem to have a very good idea of public relations but few seem to agree as to what public relations really is and what it can do. According to Wilcox, Ault, and Agee (1998), the reason for the confusion is not far-fetched since the scope of activities taken out by public relations practitioners is limitless. Black(1989) further holds that the duties of a practitioner in one organisation maybe completely different from those of a colleague in another organization, yet; both are engaged in the practice of public relations.

To Taiwo (1995), most of the confused ideas that exist about public relations spring from the fact that it is both an advisory and executive function. Public relations, he maintains, is everything from an attitude of mind to a programme. As with many activities, it is possible to pick out individual act for criticism or ridicule, but any serious assessment of public relations must take into account its full ambit. According to Seitel (1998), public relations helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other.

In fact, Aliede (2005) hold that it is difficult for any organization to claim optimal attainment of its set objectives like functionality, productivity and

profitability, without the services of public relations in one form or the other. Everyone has

virtually come to accept that all of the professions, perhaps, the one that has served humanity most is public relations. This is why Aliede (2005, p.128) sees public relations as indispensable instrument for individual, societal, organizational and governmental favourable acceptance. He further states that by means of its numerous functions and responsibilities, public relations has endeared itself to people, and more importantly is now acknowledged and appreciated as almost inevitable in all human activities.

However in spite of the huge benefits derivable from public relations, evidence show that public relations and its practitioners are the most misconstrued, misinterpreted and misrepresented. This state of flux has led to serious challenges in effectively performing the functions of the otherwise noble profession.

## ***The Mission of Public Relations***

The sole mission and purpose of public relations is the creation and promotions of understanding. In every organisation, the public relations unit has as its mission, the creation of a good corporate image and to ensure that the firm is socially responsible because good corporate image can hardly arise from otherwise (Utukere-ubani, 1996). In fact, the objectives of public relations are many and varied

- ✓ To build public confidence, goodwill and trust between an organisation and its publics.
- ✓ To attract new business, new clients or customers through a consistent, deliberate, planned and sustained effort.
- ✓ To retain employee loyalty
- ✓ To retain present clients and old customers as well as strive to attract new ones.
- ✓ To remain socially responsible by attending ceremonies organized by the host communities, their leaders or community neighbours and contributing to overall welfare, social and physical development of its area of operations.

In pursuance of its mission and objectives, the public relations units in organizations carry out programmes and most times organize events to draw close to their publics. However, sometimes the public's perceptions and attitudes towards public relations constitute obstacles to such efforts. It is instructive to note that though the desire to influence attitudes and perceptions about issues is the primary focus of the practice of public relations, this focus becomes difficult to attain where the attitude or perception is negative or non-existent.

#### ***What Public Relations is Not***

Public relations can be anything to anybody but it is certainly not voodoo, "abracadabra," magic or make-believe. It is not lying to temporarily satisfy your clients or organisation. It is definitely not saying what is untrue or half-truth to please the publics at a particular time. Since the goodwill, acceptance, and understanding an organisation seeks to establish is long lasting and enduring, it follows that good public relations should not masquerade falsehood as truth (Okafor, 2002, p. 51).

The public's perception of an organisation is a direct function of that organisation's corporate image and identity. Consequently, no organisation desirous of recognition and goodwill of its publics should employ public

relations for the creation of a false image and identity; deception or the circumvention of the truth in order to pander to the whims and caprices of the organisation's managers and influential publics.

Moreover, Jackson (2012) warns that public relations should not be used as cover-up for incompetence, inefficiency and organisational failure. What this suggests is that public relations does not thrive on empty promises or propaganda. It is not mere words without action. Rather, as Utor (2008) asserts, "it is 90 per cent doing and 10 per cent talking." According to him, public relations is neither haphazard nor is it fire brigade approach to organisational problems. He further maintains that public relation is deliberate, planned, systematic, programmed and sustained. This implies that public relations thrives on truth, reality, and social responsibility. Anything that deviates from these canons or tenets has the tendency of not only estranging the publics but also causing serious misconceptions that engender negative perceptions.

#### ***Some of the Worst Myths and Misconceptions of Public Relations***

For many years, people have equated public relations with many things ranging from the humdrum to the absurd. Some of the worst public relations misconceptions, as identified by Guy (2012), include;

##### ***Public Relations is "Spin"***

To many people, public relations is simply employing sweet and flowery language to win others over to adapt a particular position or opinion, which is what Guy (2012) calls Spin. To Wilson (2012), those who hold this dangerous misconception about public relations regard it as 'taking the truth and representing it in a way that suits an agenda.' She however warns that although public relations officers craft messages, the aim is not to tell people that black is white, but to build understanding and trust, which can only be achieved if the activity is transparent, honest and engaging. Wilson's position indicates that public relations cannot succeed on falsehood, treachery and dishonesty rather; it is geared towards doing good and getting credit for it.

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### ***Public Relations is all about Media Relations***

To many people, public relations simply has to do with talking to and lobbying the press to make them present an individual, organisation, an idea, a service or product in good light. While this may have been the case when most information was disseminated through the traditional media of newspapers, magazines, radio and television, Wilson (2012) argues that media relation is no longer the dominant skill in public relations maintaining that public relations has always consisted of much more than that. To her, public relations looks at building reputation with the aim of earning understanding and support. Therefore, it is a planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics.

### ***Public Relations Officers Always Do What Clients Want***

One of the most pervasive and dangerous misconception of public relations is that it exists to cater to the quirks and fads of clients. Most clients want coverage and would stop at nothing to get it. However, Guy (2012) warns that if they have not got anything interesting to say, it is up to public relations officers to tell them so. For Turton (2012), stories need to pass the 'so what' test. He therefore advises public relations officers to ask this question much more often to avoid issuing press releases that contain no useful information whatsoever. This means that public relations is not a mechanism for hoodwinking the publics by presenting a false image of an organisation but is aimed at highlighting the good deeds of clients in order to earn understanding and support of their publics.

### ***Public Relations Officers are Unethical***

Another misconception that is injurious to public relations and its practitioners is that it is full of unscrupulous publicists who will stop at nothing to get their way (Guy, 2012). This indeed, is a vexing and an irritating conception

of public relation because it portrays the profession in bad light. To Cornelius Alexander, Media Relations Manager at the London Probation Trust, the unethical publicist toga of public relations' officers is his number one peeve. He however blames the industry for not bursting this myth.

### ***Public Relations is only for Bad Products***

By far the most dangerous misconception about public relations is the one that it is only good for bad products. Most top managers of organisations erroneously believe that good products do not need public relations only bad ones do. They therefore, think that PR can be used to shore up bad products, this to Guy (2012), is an odd and unproductive strategy because saving PR for bad products means no one will trust what you say if you finally decide to do publicity on your good products. He thus counsels organisations that want people to know about their best product to be proud of it and make it the centerpiece of any publicity.

### ***Public Relations Means Schmoozing and Controlling the Press***

One of the most erroneous myths about public relations is the assumption that its practitioners spend time and resources dining and wining journalists. Incidentally, charm and spin do not work on journalists. This is because reporters and editors, Bergstorm (2012) notes, have seen it all and are thus schmooze-resistant. They do not bow to bantering from any quarters although in most professions it is not uncommon to wine or dine potential clients, business partners and sources. In other words, it is common place to buy people lunch or dinner. According to him, "doing lunch" is so standard that it is a cliché. He however warns that public relations is not like that. In fact, the opposite situation is the more likely.

The other part of this myth believes that public relations can control the press. This misconception is usually held by organisation's "bosses" who believe that any negative report about them and/or their organisation can easily be fixed by public relations officers (PROs). Ironically, the greatest dis-service any PRO or his boss can

do to an organisation is to try to stop a reporter from covering a story or digging for information about the organisation. This, according to Bergstorm (2012, P. 20), is a flashing neon sign that says "there is journalistic gold buried here! They are hiding something really juicy... dig, dig, and dig."

The fact is that in public relations (PR), no PR attempts to control the press no matter how smart, charming or talented they may be as the press is not a monolithic institution Bergstorm(2012) and Guy (2012, P. 3) both hold that PR is about communicating with the press in smart effective ways.

### ***Public Relations is Spin, Slogan and Propaganda***

To the uninitiated, public relations is simply gyration, twirl, mantra and hoopla. Incidentally, because PR tries to persuade, most people think that it manipulates them to do things that are not in their best interests (Bergstorm 2012, P.18). They misconstrue PR to be propaganda but nothing can be further from the truth than this myth about PR. As Onobe (2012) states, propaganda employs tricky language designed to discourage reflective thought. The effect, he maintains, is that it persuades people without seeming to do so clearly. It is psychological.

Public relations is not spin and slogan either. Bergstorm (2012) asserts that today's audience is far more exposed to media, and better at filtering it. He further posits that smart readers see right through spin and propaganda as such, trying to spin reporters is counter-productive, for this reason, PR avoids spin, slogan and propaganda. What PR actually does is getting the right information to the right people at the right time (Guy, 2012).

These myths and misconceptions about PR, no doubt, present formidable challenges to many a PR practitioner as they tend to pitch the practitioner against his clients or the publics. The right strategy to busting these myths and misconceptions, as prescribed by Guy (2012), is to adopt their opposite. According to him, candor, honesty and openness work better than spin, slogans and propaganda.

### ***Public Relations is Worthless***

Some organisations and individuals try to quantify PR and when that does not work, they regard it as a waste of time and resources classifying it as worthless. However, as Guy (2012) notes, PR cannot be measured. According to him, in public relations, there are no statistics to measure when you succeed and when you do not. Trying to do that, he maintain, is like trying to nail jelly to wall. This myth is particularly misleading because the goodwill, understanding, support and sympathy PR engenders for organisations and individuals even in times of crises cannot be quantified as such it is not waste of time or resources.

### **SOURCES OF MISCONCEPTIONS AND NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS**

The battered image of public relations in Nigeria is due to the level to which it has been messed up by some contributing factors. These factors, which constitute sources of misconceptions and negative perceptions include, but are not limited to the following:

#### ***Attitude of Some Management***

The attitude of some management towards public relations is not in the best interest of the profession and its practitioners. They see PR as only necessary when things have gone sour and the garbage needs to be cleared or something needs to be done as damage control usually in a fire brigade approach. Commenting on this, Nweke (2001, P.42-43) laments that; "some management also see practitioners as the humble environmental specialists who are always willing and ever ready to dispose of its heaps of garbage of numerous atrocities but as soon as sanity is restored, the practitioner is relegated to the background and eternally forgotten."

On his part, Aliede (2005) decries a situation where some management regard PR practitioner, in their organisation, as an errand boy who, in some cases, acts as a servant to the boss or even his wife. According to him, "it is regrettable that such a PR practitioner is

neither equipped to carry out his responsibilities nor allowed to operate from the management cadre, and is only made to know of some management decisions and policies as second hand information." Black (1989) opines that the failure of some companies and organisations to establish public relations as organized part of their activities may sometimes be due to the fact that the chief executive officer considers it to be his own personal responsibility to project the personality of the concern to the outside world.

The fact that some organisation leaders do not only regard themselves as the chief public relations officers of their organisations but are also eternally averse to anyone else taking over this important function is a great disservice to their organisations and the concept of public relations.

#### ***Lack of Requisite Professional Qualification***

Another source of misconception and negative perception about PR is the professional background of the practitioners. According to Aliede (2005, P. 135), some people get into the field ill-equipped, with little or no requisite professional qualification or ethical values. To this category of practitioners, he laments, PR only serves as meal ticket that could be used anyhow. He further submits that "with nothing at stake, no reputation, no mission or vision, these quacks go to any length in tarnishing the image of the noble profession without caring for the consequences or the implications. Aliede's submission indicate that inadequate professional capabilities on the part of PR practitioners and the presence of interlopers into the profession are serious dents on the image of public relations and a challenge on its practice.

#### ***Dumping Ground for all Manners of People***

It is regrettable and indeed, disheartening that anyone who has the means can set up shop as a public relations consultant. Aliede (2005, P.138) laments a situation where every Dick and Harry who can afford a briefcase, any kind of suit and a tie, parades himself as a public relations officer. This group of "practitioners," he maintains, constitute the greatest image problem for the profession because with no

iota of knowledge and experience of the requisite fundamentals, rudiments, principles, techniques and strategies of practice, they cannot be expected to do what they do not know how to do. To Black (1998), these untrained new comers to the field tend to bring the practice of public relations into disrepute.

The arguments by these scholars (Black, 1989, and Aliede, 2005) point to the worrying fact that people who fail to make it in other fields resort to public relations as the next port of call. Pointing the way forward, Aliede (2005, P. 137) states that a public relations practitioner should be competent to advise a client or his organisation on all aspects of a subject. To him, a wide knowledge of the world is as essential as an understanding of public relations principles and practices. Unfortunately, most times these are lacking in the quacks, charlatans and interlopers in the field. This undoubtedly leads to the negative perceptions and attitudes towards public relations.

#### ***Nigeria's Corrupt Society***

The popular saying that every society gets the kind of institutions it deserves finds practical fulfillment in the practice of public relations in Nigeria. Aliede (2005, P. 136) notes that the public relations practitioners in Nigeria operate from a society whose fabrics are already saturated by high levels of corruption in all facets of life. He thus reasons that as human beings who operate from the same corrupt society and not from the moon, it will be foolhardy to expect them to be 'saints among sinners.' This, to him, is why "they wallow in all manner of corrupt practices not minding the damage to their profession."

Another worrying factor is the poor remuneration of public relations practitioners in Nigeria. Okafor (2002) is particularly piqued that most employers of public relations personnel pay them peanuts. Under such circumstances, Aliede (2005) observes, the practitioners cut corners and get involved in various unethical things to augment their merger income to the detriment of the image of the profession.

### *The Role of the Practitioners Themselves*

Some of the public relations practitioners are not helping matters either. By their posturing and actions, they contribute in no small measure to the battered image of the profession. Aliede (2005, P. 137) refers to them as "the enemy within" because the damages they cause are so devastating that they constitute the greatest hindrance to the growth and development of public relations in Nigeria.

### *Poor Orientation of the Professionals*

Some so-called public relations practitioners, Aliede (2005, P. 137) observes, do not only lack the knowledge and experience of the profession, they are also bereft of the definite ideas of its mission and calling. To him, they therefore, represent bad news and the greatest image problem for themselves and the profession. Of this group, Nweke (2001, P. 41) writes: "because some lily-livered practitioners are not sure of the roles they are supposed to play, and for lack of confidence in their ability, they helplessly expose themselves to (but) still go on displaying an over bloated opinion of (the) importance of themselves and their practice." Added to this vexing situation is the ethical implication.

Nweke (2001, P.43) is particularly worried that those he describes as 'black sheep, infiltrators, invaders, illegal occupants, detractors, inexperienced and disgruntled practitioners have continued to constitute nuisance to the practice by their various acts, he notes, they end up detracting and eroding the honest efforts and noble accomplishments of the sincerely committed ones.' He thus submits that "this ugly situation has irrevocably dented and painted the noble profession in the worst of colours..."

### *Gold Diggers*

Another set of practitioners who are helping to drag the noble profession (PR) into the mud are those Aliede (2005, P. 137) refers to as "gold diggers in a wrong minefield." According to him, some practitioners go into

PR with notions other than to contribute to the enhancement of the fortunes of the profession through effective, professional and ethical practice, which are germane for the soaring of standards and excellence. Rather, their main motivation and attraction is high social status, recognition, glamour and big pay packets. These practitioners, who Aliede describes as vultures and image destroyers have nothing to offer for the attainment of professional objectives of public relations.

### *Voracity and Avarice among Practitioners*

Another factor that is negatively impacting on the image of PR and posing serious challenges on its practice is what Aliede (2005, P. 138) refers to as the uncontrollable greed among the practitioners. This greed manifests in many ways but the most prominent, according to him, is the "brown envelope syndrome or bread and butter style of public relations." He is particularly worried that instead of working assiduously to justify the money they extort or are given, greed pushes some of them to distort facts, colour or embellish their presentations but once this becomes public knowledge, they are subjected to serious attacks, criticism and ridicule.

Udeze (2001) laments that; it has got to a level where every act of deception or corrupt practice is called public relations by Nigerians. The situation is so bad that public relations practitioners can hardly effectively contribute to the improvement of the nation's reputation and the success of some ambitious programmes and policies such as the defunct Re-Branding Nigeria Project, Vision 20;2020, and the Transformation Agenda unless and until they possess reputation themselves as anyone coming to equity must do so with clean hands.

### *Need to Have Great Contacts*

Most public relations officers (PROs) erroneously believe that they need to have great personal relationships with influential journalists. This, to them, will be their biggest selling points (Dunleavy, 2012). This is a misconception because as Dunleavy (2013)

explains, "using 'good contacts' as a key strength when pitching for new business can be misleading, as it is not clear what warrants a strong connection." He therefore wonders if every contact, meeting or communication a PRO has had with a journalist is a strong connection. It is imperative to note that PROs have communication with journalists in more ways than one, so it does not follow that every PRO has great relationships with journalists.

This paper has exposed public relations as a concept that deals with human activities and projects humanity and the environment dynamically towards our ever changing world. The central theme in public relations is therefore, the building and sustenance of goodwill between an individual or organisation and other publics. However, misconceptions by some management and the publics as well as unprofessional and unethical activities by some practitioners have combined to drag the otherwise, noble profession into the mud. These issues have far-reaching implications for the public relations personnel, the profession and the society. This, indeed, is very disturbing and disconcerting.

The way out of this morass is for public relations practitioners to shun all practices that border on unethical tendencies and imbibe honesty and morality because, as Igboaja (2001, P.30-31) notes, this is a must if they aim at turning around the battered image of their lost glory and to take their proper position in society like such other professions as law and medicine. More importantly, an elaborate and pragmatic approach to its image laundering should be instituted. This way, a realistic repositioning of this unique profession and its practitioners would have begun. Some of the direct benefits, as outlined by Igboaja (2001), would be enhanced credibility, more effective performance, and increased productivity.

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