

# Assessment of Public Relations Practitioners' Perception on Their Own Professional Practice in Kenya

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## Abstract

Public Relations, considered a relatively new and emerging discipline in especially most developing nations dates back to human civilization. Its dramatic change since it emerged as a distinct discipline and viable profession in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century has made it grow in size, scope and significance. In Kenya, similarly, the evolution of Public Relations dates back to the Country's Communities cultural practices and traditions since the advent of human civilization even though the communities practiced it unconsciously using traditional methods. However, despite the practice's transformation, most Public Relations practitioners are still unable to exhibit their full potential due to uncertainties of what is expected of them, the myths, misconception and perceptions surrounding the profession or a complete absence of a comprehensive knowledge of their profession due to the unavailability and undocumented relevant literature in the Kenyan context. Even though the study found out that the practitioners' perception towards their practice was quite good, there were concerns over the status of their role in the organizations they served. This resulted into the mixed perceptions about the profession not only by the general public, but even amongst the practitioners themselves, which is why this study sought to assess the practitioner's perceptions towards their own profession. For this to be achieved, data was collected through semi-structured questionnaires administered to 150 registered members of Kenya's Public Relations Society (PRSK). The PR practitioners were sampled using stratified random sampling technique on the calculated proportion of both sexes.

**Key words:** Public Relations, Practitioners, Evolution, Perception, Ethical Issues

## 1. Introduction

As a relatively new discipline, Public Relations is characterized by a debate surrounding its definition and origin despite the critical role it plays in society (Butterick, 2011). As a strategic management profession with various management responsibilities to perform in organizations and society, PR as a practice manages the flow of information between an organization and its publics (Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p.6). It does so effectively by "providing such organizations or individuals exposure to their audiences using topics of public interest and news items that do not require direct payment" (Seitel, 2007, p.10).

Huang (2001) goes further to expound the practice's scope as not only including the dissemination of information, but also involving the facilitation of mutual understanding and resolving conflicts between an organization and its publics. In business, Mehta (2006) claimed, the practice had become a key tool of management, like in marketing, production and finance, while Center and Jackson (2007, p.3) noted that it motivated new behaviours, reinforced existing positive behaviours, as well as modified negative ones. It was for these attributes, among others, that Levy (2009) observed that the profession was now a recognized discipline around the world with millions of professionals who generally applied one basic theory of practice.

However, it was discovered that in countries where the practice is established, public relations play distinctive roles in areas that could spell doom to organizations if ignored. This, according to Hammond (2008), includes its role in trying to identify and interpret organizations policies and programmes with the objective of establishing links of understanding and goodwill between organizations and their publics.

Be that as it may, and despite its relatively importance in society, PR remains a profession under siege. The Career is viewed with so much skepticism even by among others, the practitioners themselves. Salcedo (2008) associated the practice's tribulations as far as its perceptions were concerned to its obscure origin, its controversial evolution, lack of a universal definition which had for long made it suffer a serious identity crisis as it struggled to position itself in society, thereby creating suspicion about its professionalism among others, as the main causes for the raging misconception.

Indeed, this is precisely the case in most developing countries, where the profession's literature in use for instance is not domesticated as well as the way it was introduced as a profession, raising suspicion as to what its original purpose was during its introductory days. Further, the profession's own definition has been viewed as a reason for further scrutiny and perception.

An on-going search for a universal public relations definition which started way back in 1975 for instance, recorded and analyzed over 1,072 definitions according to Reddi (2009, p. 3), and Sachdeva (2009, p.4). These numerous definitions too, unlike in other established professions like law, engineering or medicine, among others, largely contributed to the negative perceptions towards the profession.

However, Sharma (2004) saw the lack of training on the part of practitioners in the profession as the cause of endless perceptions. According to him, unlike is the case with public relations, all practitioners in the other established fields such as journalism, law, engineering among others were mandatorily trained, licensed and supervised, whereas in the controversial profession of public relations, he argued, the practice was relatively a new concept, open to anyone, with or without any formal training, and was also still unclear to many, a reason why he claimed, did not augur well in the eyes of the public.

In Kenya, although the new government and private sectors showed indications of warming up to the practice of public relations, years after independence, a wider public still did not understand or appreciate the strategic importance in the management of organizations. John Thuo (personal communication, February 22, 2010) lamented that public relations practitioners continued to be 'everything' to 'everybody' instead of carving out their niche and developing areas of specialization. He claimed practitioners were yet to receive the recognition they deserved, though their practices had evolved both in depth and in width, emphasizing that some organizations did not see public relations as a vital tool. The practitioners, he noted, continued to fight misperception that public relations could be guided or replaced by marketing or advertising.

The misconception of public relations in Kenya therefore started from the point it was introduced. After independence in 1963, political pressure to 'Africanize' the managements of the industrial sector as one way of training the citizen so they could assume their rightful control of the industrial sector as one way of training the citizen so they could assume their rightful control of the various sectors of the economy intensified. As a result of this pressure, and the fact that the expatriate owners of the business firms were not willing to hand over the control of their enterprises to the local people, they resorted to window – dressing techniques so as to buy time and be seen to be complying with the authorities.

According to Anderson (1987), positions such as "Personnel Manager", "Public Relations Officer," were promptly created and filled with people whose main, if not only qualification, was that they were 'nice'. He says these were people with unquestionable loyalty to the top management and the ability to carry out the wishes of the expatriate superiors without questions, and carried out duties that included liaison with government departments in matters pertaining to contracts, work permits and licences.

Sadly, and the most unfortunate thing that is still a replica to date is that the occupants of these positions were lowly placed and never participated in any decision making. As Anderson claims, their roles were to help in giving the false but desirable impression that the organizations concerned were complying with the policy of Kenyanization.

Mwaloma (1993) states that most such perceptions resulted from the fact that, a good proportion of the people who claimed to be proficient Public Relations practitioners had very little understanding of what Public Relations as a profession was all about.

It was for these and other reasons that this study was carried out to ascertain the mind boggling debate of the practice of public relations and the practitioners own perceptions towards their profession and practice in the Kenya context. While this study was being carried out, it was equally felt that the evolution of the profession be put on scrutiny as it could have had a direct bearing on the current perception bedeviling the profession.

While the focus is on the evolution of Kenya's Public Relations and the practitioner's perceptions towards their own practice, an investigation on the status of public relations literature on the African context that had been intended to be used as a basis for the Kenyan study revealed that there was very little that had been documented about Africa's Public Relations.

In fact, by 2001 when an electronic literature search was made, no information was found, and the same was true about electronic database information or even a textbook on the topic. According to Ferreira study (cited in Heerden, 2004, p.11), "The only documented literature on the subject to be found was an *ad hoc* study conducted in 1994, and two articles published in a South African accredited Journal, *Communicare*."

Indeed, his sentiments were also truly a reflection of Kenya's position on the practice. Kenya, a democratic country found in the East African region of the African Continent ([www.gok.go.ke](http://www.gok.go.ke)), has no known documented Public Relations evolution research carried out, or literature written by a Kenyan or otherwise (Tikolo, 2011, p. 19). In fact, the practitioners rely on foreign public relations literature as that from Britain, India and America as a guide to their practices and training, a situation that is seen to have compromised on their (practitioners) effectiveness and values due to some incompatibilities in application.

Despite having a fast growing Public Relations profession, Kenya lacks documented literature since its introduction and professionalization. This is why this study was taken in response to this vacuum to investigate the evolution of public relations and perceptions of its practitioners towards their profession in Kenya with a view to coming up with findings that would fill in the existing gap of knowledge.

## 2. Research Methodology

The study was conducted in Kenya, (Fig 3.1) an African country located in the East African coast of the African continent. The Sovereign Republic which became independent in 1963 from the British rule, borders South Sudan and Ethiopia in the north, Somalia and the Indian Ocean in the east, Tanzania in the south and Lake Victoria and Uganda in the west, ([www.gok.go.ke](http://www.gok.go.ke)).

Fig 3.1 Map of Kenya showing the study area, Nairobi.



Source: [www.fao.org/ag/agp/agpc/doc/counprof/kenya/kenya.htm](http://www.fao.org/ag/agp/agpc/doc/counprof/kenya/kenya.htm)

The Country's Capital City, Nairobi, is the capital and political administrative centre, with Mombasa, Kisumu and Nakuru being the other major cities. The Country occupies a land area of 580,370 km<sup>2</sup> (224,082 miles<sup>2</sup>) and falls into several well defined topographical zones extending from the Indian Ocean coast up to lofty mountain ranges that reach elevations of more than 3,048 metres (more than 10,000 feet).

## 3. Sampling Design and Sample Size

In-depth interviews and questionnaire were used for primary data collection. A list of the Public Relations Society of Kenya's 600 registered Public Relations members was availed by the professional body for the study.

The registered members (population) were stratified into two categories based on their sex. Out of the availed list, 256 (42.7%) were males, and 344 (57.3%) were females. Out of these, 150 samples were drawn using stratified random sampling technique on the calculated proportion of both sexes. Accordingly, the number of female respondents to be interviewed was 86 and that of males was 64. The proposed Public Relations personnel to be interviewed were on regular employment from Nairobi where a larger population of public relations practitioners is concentrated.

The sampled population had to be of practicing public relations practitioners belonging to the professional body (PRSK), for ease of traceability and access to practitioners, being the only formal channel through which the names, places, organizations and other related particulars of practitioners could easily be acquired.

#### **4. Data collection and analysis**

To obtain data for the study, both primary and secondary sources were consulted. To collect the primary data, in-depth interviews and questionnaire were utilized; Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) employed for analyzing the quantitative data, with descriptive statistical techniques such as average, frequency and percentages also used and Chi-square, an inferential statistical technique employed to ascertain whether there was any significant or insignificant association between performance and other variables. Qualitative data which was generated from case studies were narrated using words of the interviewees. Secondary, qualitative data (literature review) was obtained from books, papers, journals, magazines, libraries and the internet.

#### **5. Results and discussion**

##### **1. Evolution of Public Relations in Kenya**

The evolution of Public Relations practice in Kenya dates back to the Country's human civilization. People utilized traditional practices such as talking drums, moonlight story-telling and folktales telling, village square gatherings and courts, and sporting activities among other activities. According to Mramba (2010) this is what people from the communities that made up of the Kenyan society did, many years before the arrival of the colonialists. The Kenyan communities unconsciously practiced public relations even though the practice may not have been equated to the modern pattern as was known today.

##### **2. Indigenous pioneering public relations practitioners**

While Public Relations Consultancies run and managed by the whites were credited for being the pioneers of Kenya's Public Relations practice, nothing is mentioned about the locals' contribution towards the practice.

There were locals however who, despite the non-availability of their training records, were active in practice. They included Muthoni Likimani, Eunice Mathu, Muthoni Muthiga, John Luseno, then working with the British American Tobacco (BAT) as director of Public Affairs, and Isaac Lugonzo who served as a Public Relations Manager with the then Power and Lighting Company. He later became the Nairobi Mayor. In fact, Muthoni Likimani (personal communication, September 27, 2010) started off as a broadcaster in the late 1950s before venturing into public relations in 1971. She later set up her own PR consultancy firm, Nonis Publicity in 1973.

In the midst of all these, one person who emerged from obscurity after dropping out from school in Form Two due to lack of school fees to later become a leading light in Kenya's Public Relations practice was Jesse Eshikwati Opembe (Wandalo and Kubai, 1988). Opembe joined the Nyanza Maize and Produce Board (NPMB) in 1946 as a stores clerk at the age of 27. He rose through the ranks as the first African, and East African as a whole to become an Assistant Public Relations Officer of the NPMB in 1958 (p.1).

His new position in NPMB motivated him to play a leading role in the Country's development of Public Relations. He later rose to become the first indigenous Kenyan to serve the Public Relations Society of Kenya (PRSK) for a record nine years as its chairman (1973-1982) (Daily Nation, 1973, p.8).

According to K. Buhere (personal communication, December 16, 2009), Opembe ought to be honoured as the 'father-figure' of Kenya's Public Relations for the distinctive role he played in the formation of the professional body which was largely white – dominated. He pointed out that despite his limited education; Opembe was a unique, dynamic and very aggressive Kenyan who discovered the importance of public relations early enough than many people did.

### 3. Public Relations Practitioners' Perceptions towards their Profession

From the public relations point of view, perceptions have either been from the public towards the profession and the practitioners, or from among the practitioners themselves towards what they do (their profession). Sardanha (1995) opined that there had been a growing concern about public relations professionals that most of their superiors (bosses), either did not know what Public Relations was, or did, while the practitioners had on their part continued to blame their bosses for not understanding the operations or having any knowledge about Public Relations itself. To the bosses, Public Relations was about securing good publicity in the media and firefighting, they claimed (Sardanha, p 17-22).

Indeed, it has time and again been said that people act or behave based on how they perceive things. Similarly, professional's output at work places is largely linked to how they perceive their own profession, which is why to understand the situation, an assessment of public relations practitioners' perception towards their profession was carried out.

According to the findings (See Table 1), most public relations practitioners' perceived their profession well. In fact, 74.5% making a total of 82 respondents perceived public relations quite positively. These included 20.9% who perceived their profession as very good, and 53.6% who viewed it as good. The study indicated that 24 respondents making 21.8% viewed the profession as fair; while 1.8% each, either perceiving the profession as poor, or opted not to comment. One would therefore draw the conclusion that a considerable number of public relations practitioners in Kenya perceived their profession positively.

**Table 1** Public Relations Practitioners' Perception towards their profession

Perception	Frequency	Percent
Very Good		
Good	23	20.9
	59	53.6
Fair	24	21.8
Poor	2	1.8
Cannot say	2	1.8
Total	110	100.0

### 4. Rating of Public Relations in their Organizations

One aspect of the study was to identify the practitioner's perception towards the public relations practice in their organizations. The outcome of such perception towards the practice, it was assumed, could either positively or negatively have an effect on an individual practitioner's output.

The findings established that the perception about the practice was quite positive according to the feedback that was received from the practitioners. According to the study, a whopping 73.6% of the practitioners were of the opinion that public relations was generally good in the organizations they served, with only 26.4% claiming it was either fair or poor. There were however 5.5% respondents who flatly indicated that public relations was poor in their organizations, with 4.5% who had a very tremendously positive perception that the practice was excellent as shown on Table 2.

**Table 2. Practitioners’ Perceptions of Public Relations in their Organizations**

Perception	Frequency	Percent
Excellent	5	4.5
Very Good	26	23.6
Good	50	45.5
Fair	23	20.9
Poor	6	5.5
Total	110	100.0

The study further indicated that 23.6% of the practitioners interviewed perceived public relations in their organizations as very good, with 45.5% stating that it was good. About 20.9% of those interviewed perceived public relations in their organization as fair. This was an encouraging indication that a good number of organizations had embraced, and were appreciating the important role the profession was playing according to the practitioner’s perception. However, there would be no harm establishing why the 5.5% of the respondents perceived the practice as poor in their organizations.

**5. Status of Public Relations (levels) in organizations**

In trying to establish the levels at which the practice was placed in the organizations, it was evident that a greater percentage of the respondent’s perceived public relations to be a Middle Level Management function. The findings (Table 3) indicated that 60.0% of the respondents perceived public relations as a Middle Level Management function, 30.9% felt it ought to be a Top Level Management function, 8.2% of the practitioners perceived it to be a Low Level function, while .9% of them did not think it ought to be categorized at all.

**Table 3. Status of Public Relations (rating) in Organizations**

Rating	Frequency	Percent
Top Level management	34	30.9
Middle Level	66	60.0
Low Level	9	8.2
None	1	.9
Total	110	100.0

It is worth noting however that the practitioners realized the importance of public relations being a senior responsibility in organizations due to the roles it played, key among them advisory to management, image shaping and counseling. Such roles could not be handled by someone below Middle Level Management. However, as John Thuo (personal communication, February 22, 2010) opined, “there are still no structures in Kenya that clearly define the entry point of a public relations practitioner at employment level, a reason why there has been confusion even amongst the practitioners themselves as to what category in the organizational hierarchy they ought to be placed or serve.” He argues that the profession’s position in any organization ought to be at top management position because of the strategic roles they play.

Indeed, the study seems to agree with views contained in an earlier study carried out by Dozier (1986) who stated that a practitioner could only be influential in an organization if one was to be at the decision making table and be part of corporate governance.

**6. Distribution of Respondents as per recommending others to join Public Relations**

The practitioners interviewed according to the findings (Table 4) exhibited so much faith and confidence in their profession which was indeed a positive impression. Most respondents perceived public relations so positively, and without regrets whatsoever for having joined it, and would comfortably have no problem recommending any persons wishing to join it. According to the findings, a staggering 74.5 % representing 82 respondents indicated they would recommend anyone desiring to join Public Relations, with only a smaller percentage (12.7%) representing 14 respondents each, stating they would either not recommend anyone, or give any comment.

**Table 4. Distribution of respondents as per recommending others to join Public Relations**

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	82	74.5
No	14	12.7
Cannot say	14	12.7
Total	110	100.0

It is quite evident from the findings therefore that public relations practitioners' held the profession with highest esteem, a reason why they felt they could easily attract others to join the profession, confirming that they perceived their career well.

## 7. Conclusions and Recommendations

It is apparent from the study that the profession of public relations in Kenya which started on a traditional practice footing is on its take – off stage, and on a very steady growth basing this conclusion on the youthful practitioners it was attracting. The youthful population joining it clearly demonstrates the profession's vibrancy and bright future in organizations. It could equally be concluded that the practitioners' perceptions towards their profession is quite positive as reflected in their willingness to even recommend others to join it, as well as their desire to remain firm in it even if they were to move to other organizations in future.

The practitioners' relationship with their superiors which was observed as being quite positive and conducive was worth noting. It contributed positively towards their performance and enabled them to meet their expected targets.

However, the study established that there was still the need to address the actual status of public relations in organizations as far as its level of functionalism was concerned because of the cloud of uncertainty on the side of the practitioners as to what level they (entry point) ought to be serving in their organizations even though majority of them indicated they were meant to be in the middle management level category.

As a result of the mentioned reasons, the study recommended among others, the inclusion of the Public Relations Society of Kenya (PRSK) in the drafting of a Public Relations curriculum to be taught in higher academic institutions so that ethical issues are addressed. It also recommends that short term training courses be introduced to take care of the wrong perceptions some managers have about the profession as was observed. Sensitization of management on the place of PR in organizations too, was also deemed necessary.

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