

## USTAINABILITY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS ASSOCIATIONS AND AGENCIES

*Sejamothopo Motau, FPRSA  
Past President, Global Alliance & Ambassador-at-Large, PRISA*

### INTRODUCTION

The topic of this paper is couched in neutral terms, but I think we should contextualize it by raising it as a question: “Are public relations associations and agencies sustainable?” Put this way, my response would then be a qualified *yes* with regard to both associations and agencies. Let's flesh out this innocuous sounding but highly loaded response.

### SUSTAINABLE PR AGENCIES

Public relations agencies, also referred to as consultancies, are businesses. Many are quite small – one-person enterprises – while some are big companies with national and international scope. The “one-person shows” can enhance their range of offerings by attaching “associates” to the business. These associates would be specialists who provide certain skills and expertise to the small business on assignment. The advantage for the owner of the small agency is that there is no need to support a large human resource infrastructure with concomitant huge overheads.

Looking at this sector from a South African perspective, there is no doubt in my mind that agencies are sustainable. The Consultancy Chapter of PRISA, the Institute for Public Relations and Communication Management, based in Johannesburg, South Africa, has just fewer than 50 registered members. The consultancies range from micro to macro enterprises.

They provide the whole spectrum of public relations services – events management, media relations, publicity, corporate communication, crisis management, image building, environmental and health communication, and so on.



Given the vibrancy of the South African economy at this moment, many of the agencies are making the best use of available opportunities. Nevertheless, competition remains tough as a consequence of the low entry threshold into the sector. Many start-ups fall by the wayside as their young entrepreneurial owners learn the hard way that it takes much more than good looks and a beauty contest title to run a business.

Drop-outs notwithstanding, public relations is big in South Africa and in many other parts of Africa and the rest of the world. Countries like the United Kingdom, the United States, Nigeria, Italy, Kenya and India come to mind. Research also shows that the need for public relations is growing compared with related disciplines such as advertising as budget constraints take their toll.

## IN-HOUSE PR AND OUTSOURCING

While many big corporations still have full-fledged public relations or corporate affairs departments in-house, some have gone the “less is more route” by outsourcing the public relations functions. This is good news for agencies since they are the ones getting this work. Many small agencies are sustained by one or two “solid retainerships” they have with companies that have outsourced public relations. I believe that this will continue to be the trend, as companies are forced to reduce overheads by driving costs down to remain profitable. I think we have all heard of the truism that when companies think of cutting costs, the communication or public relations department is the first to go.

Many of the leaders of these companies know that communication or public relations is important but they would like to get the service “on the cheap” – thus the decision to outsource the function.

It is important to make the point here that while the global environment can be described as favourable to the sustainability of public relations agencies; the human factor has to come into the equation. Those who wish to enter this arena need to be properly skilled and have the appropriate temperament and business acumen. To be successful at any venture – public relations agency or any other enterprise – one needs to have both the professional and business skills. Financial literacy is an essential ingredient. While many practitioners, like



ourselves, generally have the requisite professional skills – and I exclude the charlatans here – we need to do some serious work on honing our business skills. This balance is necessary if we are to be profitable and sustainable independent service providers.

## SUSTAINABLE PR ASSOCIATIONS

The sustainability of public relations associations provides a different battery of challenges.

There is no doubt in my mind that public relations practitioners need to belong to their own professional associations like other professionals, such as doctors, nurses, teachers, lawyers, accountants, and so on. This need has to be satisfied at various levels – local, national, continental and international. In the case of public relations and communication, the professionals can find an international home in organizations such as the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (GA), the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) and the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC).

Continently, there are professional organizations such as Federation of African Public Relations Associations (FAPRA) European Public Relations Education & Research Association (EUPRERA), Institute for Public Relations; USA (JPR), Asean Public Relations Association (Singapore), inter- American Confederation of Public Relations(South America), and so on.

The continental and international professional bodies draw their membership from a plethora of national associations/institutes such as the Public Relations Association of Uganda, PRISA, the Institute of Public Relations of Southern Africa based in Johannesburg, South Africa; Chartered Institute of Public Relations, UK, based in London; Public Relations Society of Kenya based in Nairobi; Public Relations Society of America based in New York; Nigerian Institute of Public Relations, Lagos; and so on. The list is quite long as many countries now have an organized professional body of public relations practitioners.

All these organizations have one major challenge in common: insufficient funds! These bodies need money annuity to cover their operational costs to provide services promised to their



members. Without sufficient funds, they lose their capacity to meet the needs of the members rendering themselves irrelevant and unviable. And therein lies the primary sustainability challenge.

The root of the problem is, of course, the fact that these organizations depend on subscriptions/membership fees paid annually by their members to meet their organizational running costs. Many individual members cannot afford these fees and depend on their employers to pay the subscriptions. Many employers are no longer keen to foot this bill.

Some associations also have many retirees and students on their books. This category of members generally pays a fraction of a full member's fees, cutting further into the precarious revenue stream of the organization.

Consequently, many national associations continue to lose members due to inability to pay their membership fees. Ironically, in some associations this situation is exacerbated by an increasing enrolment of student members who do not pay full membership fees. However, these members have to receive services on the same level as full members – putting a huge strain on the organization's meagre coffers. This stressful situation has a knock-on effect on the national organization's capacity to service its financial obligations to the continental and international professional bodies.

For instance, in Africa – a continent of more than 50 countries – only a handful of countries have national public relations associations. And of these, only a few are FAPRA members in good standing. The situation is not much different at international level. For example, the Global Alliance has more than 60 national associations on its books but during the **4th** World PR Festival in May 2007 in Cape Town, less than 20 members were in good standing.

Interestingly, the most viable national associations seem to be those that have an education wing or institution (e.g. PRISA; CIPR; PRSA) and those that have a consultancy chapter as part of their membership. Surpluses accrued from the educational programmes are used to subsidize the professional association's activities. Also viable are associations in countries



where registration is compulsory. Clearly, the biggest challenge threatening the sustainability of public relations associations is financial viability.

While compulsory registration of practitioners may seem to offer a possible way out of the financial stranglehold for national associations, it is fraught with its own challenges. A serious challenge is possible political interference in the professional affairs of the association. Thus, the debate – to register or not to register – continues to rage within the profession.

### WE CAN BEAT THE POVERTY TRAP!

As may be gleaned from what has already been expressed about the viability of the association or the lack of it, I believe that we can still beat the poverty trap. Among other things, we can employ some of the tried and tested ways like “getting into business” by establishing education and training wings to our associations, turning them into institutes of learning. We could also go the registration route but we should handle this approach with care.

Let's not forget to go back to the basics. Our organizations are fundamentally made up of volunteers. For them to survive and be viable we need to continuously rededicate ourselves to the cause by investing more time, energy and self-sacrifice. We need committed leaders and members. But above all, we need to demonstrate to our members why they should belong to the professional organization. We must answer the question: "What's in it for me?"

### Conclusion

Many associations are constrained by the lack of paid staff in the secretariat. Clearly, this has very serious financial implications for struggling associations, but we must strive to secure this resource as it is critical for the execution of the decisions taken by the volunteer members and leaders of the organization. There is also a need to drive and maintain membership recruitment; secure sponsorships for workshops, publications and conferences and to see to proper governance requirements.



The leadership must inspire members to take ownership of the association seriously to a point that they would feel its failure as their personal failure. Such inspirational leadership must also communicate the benefits and successes of the association to members. And collectively, we must promote public relations and its value to the economic, social and political endeavours of our countries, continents and the world.

As public relations professionals and organizations, we are sometimes our own worst enemies because while we can make and promote others, we can hardly say anything good about our profession!

