

**2006 Atlas Award Presentation
on International Public Relations**

***Global Trends and the Challenges of
Public Relations***

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**2006 Recipient
PRSA Atlas Award for Lifetime Achievement
in International Public Relations**

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Global Trends and the Challenges of Public Relations

Mike Okereke
2006 Award Winner
PRSA Atlas Award for Lifetime Achievement
in Public Relations

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, my wife, sister and I feel greatly honoured to be with you in Salt Lake City, Utah to receive the Atlas Award for Lifetime Achievement in International Public Relations. Since I am the first African to receive this award, I have decided to dedicate the award to Nigeria and the African continent.

The Public Relations Society of America, with a membership of over 21,000, is the world's largest organization for public relations professionals. We in Africa appreciate the excellent global roles played by PRSA to promote the development of public relations practice worldwide. PRSA is seen globally as a model public relations professional body and we commend your members for promoting the global high standard of public relations practice through education, its International Section, the Atlas Award for outstanding Lifetime Achievement in International Public Relations and the Global Alliance.

I have travelled worldwide; my experience is that people do not know much of Nigeria or Africa where I come from. Permit me to spend a few minutes on Nigeria and Africa.

Africa is the second largest continent in the world. This beautiful continent lies astride the Equator. It is about 8,000 kilometers from north to south and, at its widest point, over 7,000 kilometers east to west. Africa occupies 22 percent of the earth's surface. The vegetation is Equatorial Mediterranean, Mangrove and Savannah. Africa is the oldest and the most stable land mass on Earth. The continent is the cradle of civilization, plants and animal, including human.

Evidence of fossil bones, stone tools and trails of footprints of a mud pan from East Africa confirmed that the ancestors of humanity evolved from Africa. About 100,000 years ago, some Africans left their domain for the rest of the world. They moved to the Mediterranean region. They reached Asia and Australia, later to Europe and then to South America. Africa is a continent of natural beauty and culture. We are closer to nature. No wonder Africa is the haven for tourists. You do not need to go to the zoo to see wildlife; bird-viewers know that Africa is blessed with a variety of birds.

Nigeria, where I come from, is the heartbeat of Africa. We have a population of over 120 million people. Nigerians are the friendliest people in the world. We are blessed with natural resources such as petroleum, gas, solid minerals, etc. Nigeria is the sixth-largest world producer of petroleum. We are positioned to be the world's largest producer and exporter of gas.

American companies such as Exxon Mobil and Chevron operate in Nigeria. It is an investment haven, welcoming foreign investment with an excellent return on investment. We hope that public relations consultancies in the United States of America will explore the public relations consultancy opportunities in Africa and team up with African public relations consultancies.

I have been asked to prepare a white paper that provides an “opportunity to share my experience and wisdom gained from lifetime of work in international arena.” I have decided to base my presentation on “**Global Trends and the Challenges of Public Relations Practice.**”

Global Trade and Public Relations

International trade and commerce are the greatest cementing forces in the world today. International trade has not only survived but transcended national, international and regional differences. Many years ago, centres of trade and civilization were located along the coast where goods and ideas were exchanged. Today, with the advancement of technology, the importance of geographical barriers to physical trade has decreased. Public relations and communications have broken barriers and brought countries and businesses closer.

Countries that fought each other for centuries have come together to form the European Common Market. Today, most members of the European Union use one currency, the Euro. They have a European Parliament and several trade agreements including free passage of their members.

On a global scale, more than 20 countries including the U.S.A., Japan, Canada and the European countries have created the Organisation for Economic Development. In Asia, countries have come together and China and India are now the beautiful brides. In Africa, there is a move towards the Africa Common Market. The Organisation of African Unity has changed its name to African Union. African regional markets, such as the West African Economic Community (ECOWAS), have firmly established themselves. It is implementing a plan of action that will include free movement of citizens and adoption of a common currency for the region.

In spite of global advances and cooperation achieved through globalization and international trade, there are still fears and apprehension about the impact of globalization and global trade on the world economy. Opponents of globalization, trade liberalization and global trade say that their concerns include fears about:

- the speed at which capital moves across the border.
- the acceleration of technological changes replacing workers.
- the globalization battle as winner-take-all.
- globalization widening the communication gap between organizations and their employees.

They are also concerned that organizations are seen not to have a human face any longer. There is no more job security. In the past, profit meant more job security and better

wages. Today, the view is held that restructuring, re-engineering, downsizing or whatever name it is called, has become the order of the day worldwide. Today, it is considered normal for organizations to announce huge profit increases and, at the same time, announce both a restructure of the organization and layoffs of employees.

These key issues pose challenges for public relations professionals worldwide. Our forecast is that the forces of globalization, trade liberalization and advances in technology will remain. The task of public relations practitioners is to monitor these global trends, analyze changes, predict their consequences for the organizations, and propose responses. The services of public relations will be in demand to explain the benefits of business restructuring and to manage crises associated with change management. We have a responsibility of bridging the communication gap between the two schools of thought on the benefits and demerits of globalization. Public relations for change management will continue to occupy the centre stage in our future work for clients.

Global Regulation and Corporate Governance

Let me also point out that one consequence of globalization is global regulation. Corporate governance will increasingly be in public focus and chief executive officers, directors and managers will increasingly be under pressure to comply. We are likely to witness an era of increased public scrutiny of our policies and activities.

Transparency and integrity are key issues for corporate organizations around the globe. In pursuing global requirements for transparency and accountability, most financial institutions, central banks and reserve banks have established codes of best practice on corporate governance. The banks aim to eliminate:

- Insider-related lending or dealing.
- Rendering of false returns to regulatory authorities.
- Concealment of information to bank examiners.
- Ineffective audit committees.

The Code of Corporate Governance for Banks in Nigeria Post Consolidated outlines best practices that make it mandatory for banks to:

- Establish a committed and focused board of directors “which exercises its oversight functions with high degree of independence and integrity.”
- Establish procedure to reasonably manage “inevitable disagreements between the bank directors and management.”
- Establish a system whereby the members of non-executive directors exceeds the executive directors.
- Establish an effective and efficient audit committee of the board.
- Appoint external and internal auditors of high integrity.
- Establish internal monitoring and enforcement of the code.
- Hold regular management meetings reporting on the monitoring system of the code.

Global experience has shown that a breach of global regulation or corporate governance guidelines of corporate bodies could lead to the death of the affected companies. I therefore hold the view that public relations practitioners worldwide appear to pay greater

attention to external stakeholders relations, while the internal stakeholders are left in the cold.

Employees need to be well informed about global regulatory, corporate governance guidelines and their expectations. They need to be well informed about the company's vision, mission and objectives. We should enlist employees support for our change-management policy, business restructuring and rationalization.

World Peace Security Issues and Public Relations

The third theme is security issues and world peace. Security, taken for granted in the past is now a global concern. Security issues now occupy centre stage in most parts of the world. We all recall the American Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States of America, the bombing of the tourist resort in Indonesia, the Spanish train bombing, the July 7, 2005 train bombing in London, the July 11, 2006 train bombing in India, etc.

The London Chamber of Commerce recently conducted a survey among its members and report that one year after the July 7, 2005 bombing of the London underground trains, company directors in Britain believe that London is not any safer and that businesses in the capital are less prepared for a disaster. The survey found that only 25 percent of company directors believe that the transport system is any safer now than it was when the terrorist struck. Fifteen percent of directors surveyed have changed their travel habits as a result of last year's attack.

The directors made a number of recommendations on measures that could be taken by British Government to safeguard the London transport system. Most think there should be greater use of body scanners on the transport system while two-thirds of the respondents favour the deployment of armed undercover police officers in tubes and on trains.

More than half of the respondents support more extensive use of stop-and-search powers. Other recommendations include highly visible policing of the transport system and the creation of a homeland security department, with a minister of cabinet ranking as the head. The London Chamber of Commerce also recommended that a reward scheme be designed to encourage information to be volunteered on a confidential basis to lead to the foiling of terrorist attacks.

The London Chamber of Commerce recommended that the government should offer financial incentives to encourage contingency planning by businesses. The Chamber said that the government should also ensure that communication with businesses is practical, realistic and conducted through appropriate organizations. They urge that communication should be delivered by relevant bodies to which businesses can relate more easily.

In the U.S., major steps have been taken to address the issue. One of the most significant aspects to combat the problem on American soil is the restructuring of the U.S. federal government to provide focus at the highest level. On September 20, 2001, just nine days after the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. government created an office of Homeland Security to coordinate immediate homeland security efforts. In November 2002, the work of the

Homeland Security office was expanded into a full government department led by a Cabinet-level Secretary of Homeland Security. This Department has a wide range of responsibilities including transport security, emergency response and preparedness, immigration and customs. In all, 22 agencies that previously reported to 10 different government departments have been brought under one roof.

I hold the view that the global security issue will continue to persist for a long time unless public relations practitioners intervene. Since the key role of public relations is to establish mutual understanding with all stakeholders, I hold the view that the leaders of the public relations profession should mobilize all public relations practitioners worldwide with a view to restoring global peace and security. We should start with an analysis of the problem and find out the expectations of the stakeholders. The stakeholders should be brought to the discussion table and we should encourage “dialogue for peace.” We should encourage two-way flow of information. We believe that public relations can initiate a solution to the global problem of security by encouraging dialogue. This is a challenge for all public relations practitioners worldwide.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Corporate social responsibility is now a key issue for public relations practitioners. The principles and practice of social investment will become critical to the operations of corporate organizations. Companies will be under added pressure to get involved and invest in:

- Environmental management
- Community development and community relations
- Sponsorship of sports and arts exhibitions
- Donations to charities
- Awarding of scholarships
- Establishment of university chairs, etc.

Public relations practitioners need to conduct a community relations survey on the expectations of the community before and during their social-investment programs. To avoid conflicts, public relations practitioners must have a clearly defined corporate social responsibility policy and programs.

Human Capital Development for Public Relations

The global public relations practice will require highly skilled and well-trained public relations practitioners. The need for continuing education, internationalization and global networking cannot be overemphasized. Public relations practitioners must be trained and retrained if they are to meet the challenges of the future. The public relations practice is a top management function and public relations courses in universities should be based within the faculty of management or business administration.

Summary

The forces of globalization, trade liberalization and advances in technology will remain. The fallout of globalization is global regulation.

Public relations for change management will occupy centre stage. Global peace and security should be the concern of public relations practitioners. We should encourage dialogue and communication with all stakeholders.

Corporate social investment has become a critical issue for public relations practitioners. The training and retraining of public relations practitioners cannot be overemphasized.

We thank the Public Relations Society of America for the award. My wife and I and all Africans are most grateful for the recognition.

Thank you.

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The Atlas Award for Lifetime Achievement in International Public Relations

Established in 1995 by the International Section of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the Atlas Award for Lifetime Achievement in International Public Relations recognizes individuals who have made extraordinary contributions to the practice and profession of public relations on a global scale. Through a substantial body of their work, recipients have demonstrated leadership in international public relations for employees, clients, institutions, governments, agencies or other organizations. Winners are selected by the Executive Committee of the International Section in consultation with colleagues in international practice. The Atlas Award is presented during the annual PRSA International Conference. As part of the Award recognition, each winner is invited to prepare a White Paper on a specific aspect of international public relations practice. This paper is made available to PRSA members at the Conference and via the PRSA Web site.

Atlas Award Recipients:

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1996 – **José Rolim Valença**, Brazil

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1997 – **Harold Burson, APR, Fellow PRSA**, United States

1998 – **Lawrence G. Foster, APR, Fellow PRSA**, United States

1999 – **Dennis Buckle**, Great Britain

Jacques Coup de Frejac, France

2000 – **Gavin Anderson**, United States

2001 – **Barbara M. Burns, APR, IPRA Fellow**, United States

2002 – **Göran E. Sjöberg**, Sweden

2003 – **Daniel J. Edelman, APR, Fellow PRSA**, United States

2004 – **Sylvan M. Barnet, Jr.**, United States

Arthur Reef, United States

2005 – **Betül Mardin, IPRA Fellow**, Turkey

2006 – **Manuel Alonso M.**, Mexico

Mike Okereke, Nigeria