

# **An Evaluation of Kenya's Public Relations Practitioners' Understanding of their Career's Ethical Issues**

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## **Abstract**

Ethical issues have been raised about the practice of some careers whose professional output in society has been in doubt due to perceived dishonesty, insincerity and lack of genuineness, considering that truthfulness is a critical virtue that endears patrons to a given business. One such career that has been viewed with so much skepticism is Public Relations, whose ethics code has never been universal despite the adoption of the International Code of Ethics for Public Relations, popularly known as the Code of Athens in 1965. The same is true about the practice even within individual countries, where professional values differ from one practitioner to the other. In Kenya for instance, the professional body is yet to regularize the trade through legislation. This has resulted into professional abuse by some, brought discontent and enhanced misconception with many thinking it a 'walk-in-walk out' career with or without any form of training. This study therefore was carried out to ascertain the practitioners' understanding of the professions' ethical issues, and how they navigate through as they discharge their daily duties. To achieve this, a stratified random sampling method of 110 practitioners drawn from Kenya's Public Relations Society (PRSK) was used. It was found that most practitioners were shrouded with a cloud of uncertainty about ethical issues, forcing them to practice PR based on their own instincts depending on what they considered right or wrong as there was no law that held them to accountable (responsible).

**Key words:** Public Relations, Practice, Ethical issues, Account, Legislation.

## **1. Introduction**

While the core functions and responsibilities of public relations are none other than community relations, reputation management, corporate social responsibility, stakeholder relations and corporate branding, these activities can easily and effectively be carried out if those doing so are guided by a professional code of ethic.

Ethics, defined as the method that enables us categorize our values and pursue them are statements of principles agreed to by professional organizations that are intended to guide members in moral decision making. The statements are designed to aid individuals as they navigate through their daily practice, and to reassure the public and their clients that the profession as a whole adheres to high standards of conduct and has a system of accountability for those that are not conforming. How therefore, is the case in most countries?

Trends and researches carried out in the recent past globally have continued to associate public relations with all things unethical. Propaganda, spin doctoring, lying and espionage are some of those key negativities that are associated with the profession, according to Bowen (2007). Many critics have argued that there cannot be ethical public relations because the career itself is akin to manipulation and propaganda. In fact, there is an ending belief among journalists, policy makers, and laymen who believe that even the term 'public relations ethics' is, an unreal possibility, smoke and mirrors to hide deception.

It is common knowledge that a profession can only succeed if it is backed by a code of ethics because as a general rule, any self-regulating profession that serves the public has a duty to adhere to a certain type of ethics. This is why Public Relations as a profession cannot be an exception. However, unlike doctors, dentists, lawyers, police officers, social workers and psychologists whose requirement to belong to the professional group and follow its code of conduct is laid out in legislation, as is the case with professionals guided by the rule of law, the case is totally different with journalism and public relations. The two develop codes of conduct voluntarily to prompt public trust and goodwill towards their chosen field, and to encourage uniform ethical standards and professionalism within their ranks. However, it is a common belief that having an exclusive code of ethics set by a professional body gives the practicing professionals credibility.

It is indeed a known fact that ethical codes are never universal, even in the countries they exist, which is why it cannot be assumed that everyone, regardless of the situation and culture, is guided by the same ethical standards. Kenya's professional body, Public Relations Society of Kenya (PRSK) is a typical example. Started in the early 1970s, the professional body with slightly over 500 paid up members today (Ngonyo & Oywer, 2017), a figure that has continued to fluctuate as membership is not mandatory, is yet to have clearly defined ethics for her practitioners. The body is still in the process of fine-tuning a Bill to be presented to Parliament so that when it becomes law, the practitioners could be held accountable as well as be certified to work as PR professionals.

According to Marete (Nov. 18, 2016), the move will ensure there is ethics and accountability, a statement supported by Abdullah & Threadgold (2008) in a similar study carried out in Malaysia who pointed out that litigation can only be carried out easily if one goes against any professional conduct when one belongs to a specific professional body. The two further noted that competent PR practitioners needed to be accredited in order to differentiate between real PR practitioners and imposter practitioners, or as they are referred to in Kenya, *matapeli*. As the situation stands, most practitioners in Kenya, a good number of them having crossed over from the practice of Journalism, only act on their own instincts based on what they, as individuals consider acceptable or not.

The practice of public relations varies from one organization to another even though the role it plays in the establishments is generally the same – enhancing an organization’s corporate image and status in the eyes of its publics, among other related reasons. However, what is right or wrong, fair or unfair, caring or not, good or bad human behaviour, responsible or irresponsible, are key values that need to be observed by every practitioner in the course of discharging their duties. Such are what constitute PR ethics, and are critical because the practice is about earning credibility, managing trust and transparency, all which are associated with being truthful. As Seitel (2007) puts it, Public Relations must be based on “doing the right thing” – in other words, acting ethically.

Parson (2005) outlines three reasons that clearly demonstrate the importance of ethics in public relations as to;

- Provide a framework for understanding important ethical issues in public relations and corporate communications, now and in the future,
- Help develop an attitude that support the concept that ethics are very key to professionalism and credibility in the field; and
- Assist in everyday ethical decision making.

Grower (2003) on his part enumerates the Public Relations Society of America’s (PRSA) code of professional standards for the practice which he says was meant to meet three distinct goals. They are to;

- Provide behavioural guidelines to its members
- Educate management on public relations standards
- Distinguish public relations professionals from those individuals who use the title but are perceived as giving the profession a bad name.

A critical look at the PRSA code of ethics confirms a wholistic approach, touching on the practitioners understanding of their moral values, as well as the benefits management would reap from the services of the practitioners they hire. This is why the profession is viewed as the ethical heart of an organization, and a watchdog of all events that take place in the organizations. It is meant to safeguard corporate image as well as call on professionals to act as corporate guardians meant to protect and sustain the reputation of organizations.

## **2. Objective of the study**

The study purposes to give PR practitioners in Kenya an insight of how ethical issues are to be addressed in the cause of their duty given the varied challenges they face considering the fact that they have for long been forced to rely on foreign publications for their practice, as well as fill the gap that has characterized the practice in the country and the African region as a whole.

## **3. Research Methodology**

This inaugural study on PR ethical issues was carried out in Kenya, an African Sovereign Republic located in the East African coast of the African continent. The country 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.



Source: Ngonyo & Challa (2016)

Nairobi is the Country’s capital and political administrative centre, with Mombasa, Kisumu and Nakuru being the other major cities. Kenya 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).

### 3.1 Sampling Design and Sample Size

A list of the PRSK’s 600 registered members was made available to the researcher 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%) 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. Although a total of 150 were identified for interview; only 110 questionnaires were returned while 40 could not be retrieved.

### 3.3 Data Collection Instrument

Data was collected through a structured close-ended and open-ended questionnaire administered to the said participants.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Familiarity with Ethics

Realizing the challenges PR practitioners were facing in Kenya considering that the country did not have a very well established professional body guided by legislation a necessity was felt to establish through a study whether the practitioners were familiar with ethical issues that guided their practice. The outcome is presented and discussed below:-

**Table 1: Public Relations Practitioners' familiarity with Ethical issues**

Familiarity	Frequency	Percent
Yes	100	90.9
No	10	9.1
Total	110	100.0

As it was observed earlier that the professional body is in the process of coming up with a bill that if given a nod by Parliament would ensure there is ethics and accountability in the profession, the findings were quite clear that most practitioners were conscious about the expected values that went with their practice. Findings from the study revealed that majority of the respondents interviewed responded in the affirmative. According to the study 90.9 % of them (100 respondents) claimed they were familiar with the profession's ethical issues, with only 9.1% made up of 10 respondents indicating they were not familiar.

It was encouraging to note that most practitioners were conscious and familiar with their ethical practices, which was quite important and commendable especially with such a profession that had a lot of negativities than compliments in the eyes of most publics considering the misconception and poor perceptions people have had about the profession (Ngonyo & Challa, 2016). However, whether the respondents adhered to the ethical issues or not was totally a different matter altogether. Achieving trust is the target for all Public Relations practitioners. This was feasible through highly professional and ethical behaviors, practices that were based on a culture of honesty, integrity, truthfulness, and intellectual curiosity, values that are meant to be engraved in individual practitioners' hearts. Wilcox and Cameron (2009) emphasized this importance by stating that the standard rubric called upon the practitioner to be totally honest in maintaining their credibility and gaining trust even while dealing with journalists and editors, as the bottom line for all the practitioners.

#### **4.2 Knowledge of what could be unethical**

In a bid to establish which among the choices provided would be deemed unethical in the practice of public relations, the study found out that dissemination of wrong information was deemed to be the most unethical practice in public relations, than soliciting for public favors and paying Editors for publicity in that order.

**Table 2: What Public Relations practitioners consider unethical**

Unethical practices	Frequency	Percent
Paying Editors for Publicity	25	22.7
Soliciting for public favours	31	28.1
Disseminating wrong information	49	44.5
All of them	4	3.6
Can't say	1	0.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The study found out that 44.5% of the respondents considered dissemination of wrong information as most unethical, with 28.1% finding Soliciting for favours from the public one served as being quite unethical, while 22.7 % considered Paying Editors for publicity as a most unethical act in public relations. Interesting, 3.6% of the practitioners felt all the three were unethical practices, while one person declined to comment. It is clear from the findings therefore that there is a dire need for an urgent legislation to be passed by parliament as indicated earlier so that all practitioners have a uniform understanding of the virtues a practitioner subscribe to.

Indeed, while the dissemination of wrong information with a clear knowledge was indeed wrong and unethical, it was quite worrying that to some, paying editors for publicity and soliciting for public favours was considered a normal practice as the statistics indicated. It was in fact quite worrying to note that 22.7% of the respondents did not consider paying editors for publicity and soliciting for public favours (28.1%) as equally unethical. This could just be a pointer to the moral values found in the Public Relations practice in the country, which calls for urgent sensitization and training on ethical issues.

However, while the Kenyan study clearly gives a worrying picture of the practitioner's practices on the ground, the same was tolerated elsewhere in the world, as it was considered part of other peoples' cultural practices, without anything unethical in it. A study carried out in Malaysia, for instance, according to Halimahton (1997) noted that some 30 new workers in an organization interviewed on media ethics believed accepting gifts was "part and parcel of news gathering". The respondents viewed door gifts like pens and t-shirts as "building rapport" and "gestures of goodwill" rather than an attempt to bribe the journalists into giving the source of information favourable coverage.

Kaur and Shaari (2006) further argued that indeed culture contributed significantly to such violations of ethical practices in some countries. They noted that indeed in the Malaysian context where giving has become a culture, not accepting a gift may perhaps be seen to be insulting the giver or as a rude behavior. They claimed that Journalists do not ask for gifts, but when given, they are usually culture-bound to accept.

This therefore, becomes a complex issue as to whether cultural practices should override the importance of professional ethics. Indeed, there must be a way out of how professional ethics should be applied globally, cultural practices notwithstanding if the status of the practice is to match the other mainstream professions like law, engineering and medicine among others, bearing in mind that the profession’s perception in the eyes of some public is not encouraging.

### **4.3 Conscience**

Individual consciences is what makes him or her, either commit, or avoid committing a criminal act irrespective of where orders emanate from. It was for this reason that the study sought to get views from practitioners on whether it was ethical or not, to facilitate the publication of a misleading report. The following were the responses:-

**Table 3: Public Relations practitioners’ delegated instructions by management to facilitate the publication of an organization’s report with incorrect facts**

Facilitation of publication	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	51	46.36
No	42	38.18
Can’t say	17	15.45
Total	110	100

It was quite clear from the findings that almost half of the practitioners would not be guided by their conscience of what is good as opposed to what would be bad to be done in the practice even when the issue is quite clear. This conclusion is derived from the findings where 51 respondents representing 46.36% claimed they would facilitate their organization’s report even if it had misleading content, 38.18% representing 42 respondents indicating they would not, while 17 respondents representing 15.45% observed they would rather not comment about it.

This is a worrying development considering that in Table 1 a large percentage of the practitioners claimed they were familiar and conversant with ethical issues. It is hence, ironical that those that were meant to be the management’s advisors would let a damaging report like this pass, with their full knowledge, without exercising their professionalism by alerting management and pointing out the defects in the report for correction before publication.

This contravenes one important PRSK’s adopted Code of Ethics of which the practitioners subscribed to as members. The particular code which is the third rule of the Public Relations Society of Kenya out of its 17 rules that were adopted from the Code of Athens (International code of ethics for public relations) through the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) at its General Assembly in May, 1965 states;



A member shall not intentionally disseminate false or misleading information and shall use proper care to avoid doing so. He has a positive duty to maintain truth, accuracy and good taste ([www.prsk.co.ke](http://www.prsk.co.ke)).

It is quite clear from the adopted code that sensitization of members on ethical issues would make more sense than just the adoption. As Parsons (2008) cautioned; all those practitioners who belong to professional bodies sign up to a code of conduct, but even though this is critical, codes and protocols need translating into reality. This translation in the Kenyan situation is what did not happen through training; otherwise the findings would not have shown such a glaring variance.

Irrespective of the reasons, the practitioners must be guided by their conscience and ethical code of conduct as advocates and advisers of such managements. Lim and Hussein (2006, p.67) also argued that while it was indeed ethical for public relations practitioners to be partial to their employer and clients, professionals were not permitted to act in an unethical manner on their behalf for whatever reason. They noted that the public relations function should not be about disseminating misleading information to make an organization or an individual look good. Rather, public relations should function as a strategic management activity that advises management on developing, implementing and maintaining relationships with its public.

Martinson (2004) while focusing his attention to public relations students' drives the point home quite clearly when he states thus:-

Public relations students need to recognize that the public relations field has a very negative reputation among large segments of the American public not so much because practitioners engage in persuasive communication efforts on behalf of clients/organization in their role defined capacity, but the problem is rather related to the public perception that too many persons who call themselves public relations professionals do not respect the truth and do not respect those to whom particular communication efforts are directed" (p.4).

What this translates to is that public relations professionals should be the conscience of their organizations, as advisers and advocates of good practices, irrespective of the pressures or intimidation from management, because at the end of the day, it is the integrity and image of the organizations that is always at stake. This bounces back to haunt the public relations professionals and the managements' alike, hence, destroying their integrity, and the reputation of the organizations.

#### **4.4 Selfish Reasons**

One of the things that prevent individuals from being independent thinkers and save situations where their input is highly required in the establishments in which they work is fear of the



unknown, which at times kill, or make a profession be perceived in poor light by the public. The following findings explain why:-

**Table 4: Reasons for facilitating publication**

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
To keep one's job	30	58.82
Obedience	15	29.41
Collective responsibility	5	9.80
Can't say	1	1.96
Total	51	100

In trying to understand why the 51 practitioners on Table 3 would go ahead and facilitate the publication with incorrect facts delegated to them by their management, 30 out of the 51 respondents representing 58.82% said they would do so to keep their jobs, as going against the wishes of the organization would amount to insubordination, hence, losing their jobs, 15 respondents representing 13.63% felt going against the organization's wishes would be disobedience, 5 respondents representing 4.54% termed their reason in support as being part of organizational collective responsibility, while 1 respondent representing 0.9% could not comment.

Sachdeva (2009) is opposed to such kind of reasoning. He claims the role of public relations is advisoral and presentation of public image to management, whether good or bad. He argues that public relations practitioners were expected to give advice irrespective of how good or bad the situation was, for appropriate solutions to be found, for the good of the organizations.

A similar opinion is equally shared by Huang (2001) who castigates such public relations practitioners for failing in their duties and becoming opportunistic. He states that the responsibility of public relations practitioners was not only to disseminate information, but also facilitating mutual understanding and resolving conflicts between organizations and its publics.

It is quite clear therefore from those that indicated they would facilitate the publication of their organization's report that they disregarded the existence of professional ethics to satisfy their personal interests, which indeed damages the status of the profession in the eyes of the public and society as a whole. One would therefore conclude that professionalism is always threatened by practitioners who do not understand the value and importance of their ethical code. Their reasons for serving, or holding such positions in those organizations, considering that so much was expected from them, in terms of advice, assistance in repackaging their organizations outlook and policies, as well as counseling of management on issues, among others, was selfish.

#### 4.5 Motive

The study further sought to establish whether it was permissible for Public Relations practitioners to pay reporters from different media houses in order to get good and positive coverage for their organizations. Table 5 has the outcome:-

**Table 5: Distribution of practitioners as per their payments to Journalists in different media houses for**

<b>good and positive coverage</b>		
Good and positive coverage	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	63	57.27
No	17	15.45
Can't say	30	27.27
<b>Total</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>100</b>

It was evident from the study that a large percentage of the respondents perceived the payment of Journalists in different media houses so as to continuously get good and positive coverage to be as normal as any other payment. According to the findings, 63 respondents making 57.27% did not see anything wrong with such facilitation. Only 17 respondents making 15.45% of the total felt it was not right to pay Journalists in order to enhance the chances of getting good and positive coverage. Even the remaining 27.27% who could not comment on the issue was equally an issue of concern.

It is worth noting that any form of payment for purposes of publicity violates the 4<sup>th</sup> prescribed rule of the Public Relations Society of Kenya's (PRSK) adopted Code of Ethics, which states:-

‘A member shall not engage in any practice which tends to corrupt the integrity of channels of public communication nor use any manipulative methods of techniques designed to create subconscious motivations which the individual cannot control of his own free will and so cannot be held accountable for the action taken on them’ (www.prsk.co.ke).

The question one could ask, is if this code is in existence, and assumedly known by even the few registered members in the practice, why then should there be such a large percentage exhibiting ignorance to the prescribed ethical practices?

However, the Kenyan study is not an isolated case. A research carried out by Kaur and Shaari (2006) on how public relations practitioners and journalists of many years standing experience perceived such a vice, majority of public relations practitioners confessed they did not see anything wrong with it. According to their findings, 60.4% of the public relations practitioners “most agreed” giving gifts (facilitation) to journalists (35.5%). On the other hand, the majority of journalists interviewed (37.1%) only “agreed” to the question. The public relations practitioners according to the two researchers thought that giving gifts to journalist was less of

a breach of ethics compared to the journalists. They considered gift-giving as a token of appreciation.

Whatever the motive, any payments to secure any coverage other than advertisements, is professionally wrong since the merit for a news item is based on the newsworthiness which in itself is not paid for, and not through inducements or manipulative means, which amount to corruption, a terrible vice in the career.

#### **4.6 Use of unethical tools**

From its definition, public relations is based on truthfulness, sincerity and honesty among other values that are meant to inculcate integrity as a profession that highly devotes its focus on image building of either an organization or individuals. In line with this, this study sought to establish whether at the peak of a looming crisis in their organizations public relations practitioners in Kenya would revert to employing propaganda or spin as the last resort to help them avert damaging publicity. The following were the findings.

**Table 6: Utilization of propaganda or spin by practitioners as the last option to avert damaging publicity in organizations**

Use of propaganda or spin	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	71	64.54
No	28	25.45
Can't say	11	10
Total	110	100

It was interesting to note that, pushed to the wall, public relations practitioners perceived the utilization of propaganda and 'spin' was the best option to escape the possibility of their organizations being damaged by bad publicity. According to the findings, 71 respondents representing 64.54% perceived the use of propaganda and 'spin' at such a critical moment as worth, with 28 of the respondents representing 25.45% feeling it would not be ethical to do so. However, 11 respondents representing 10% decided not to express their views on the issue.

Indeed, this revelation is quite telling. While it is understandable that propaganda and 'spin' were basically manipulative tools whose end result was meant to benefit the user, which in essence did not invoke dialogue (two-way communication), lacked integrity, honesty and all the positive values, there were all possibilities that honesty and sincerity during such a situation would endear the organization to positive coverage. Jethwaney and Sarkar (2009, p. 4) clearly explained the purpose of propaganda as that which did not aim to inform but influence; not necessarily to convert but to attract followers to keep them in line.

It is quite evident therefore that the role of propaganda and 'spin' in such a situation if utilized by the public relations practitioners would not be based on the objective role the profession

was meant to play, but rather, it would blanket the truth, which would eventually come to be known and subsequently destroy the reputation and integrity of the organization later.

#### **4.7 Receiving or giving gifts**

Gifts or tokens may not look as significant as they ought to be, especially by the recipients, but certainly mean a lot to those that give them, since they are in most cases tied to a favour, which at times may turn out to be damaging scandals that could collapse an organization and destroy its image. Findings from public relations practitioners in Kenya on the same revealed the following:-

**Table 7: Distribution of Public Relations practitioners as per their acceptance of gifts from clients**

Accepting gifts	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	73	66.36
No	36	32.72
Can't say	1	0.9
Total	110	100

According to the findings 66.36% representing 73 respondents firmly indicated they would treat a gift from their suppliers, just as such, while 36 respondents represented by 32.72% felt it would be unethical to do so. Further, 0.9% representing one person could not give their opinion.

Indeed, the issue of gifts or tokens is quite tricky, especially when a practitioner is dealing with clients doing business with their organizations. While the practitioner may be sincere in accepting the gift, the client's purpose may be totally different. This could eventually become a double edged sword. Cost both the practitioner his integrity, and terribly dent the image of the organization. The best one should do is to avoid such situations. While it varies from one culture to another, the values of a profession need not be compromised by cultural values when it comes to ethical practices.

#### **4.8 Favours**

Should PR practitioners offer Journalists favours? This is what this study further wished to ascertain from the practitioners. While the adopted Athens Code of Ethics by Country's Public Relations Society of Kenya (PRSK) which states that members shall at all times deal fairly and honestly with his clients or employees past and present, with his fellow members and with the general public' ([www.prsk.co.ke](http://www.prsk.co.ke)), and which all members subscribe to, the study established the following:-

**Table 8: Public Relations practitioners funding of a Journalist’s project in exchange of favourable publicity**

Funding Journalist’s project	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	82	74.54
No	26	23.63
Can’t say	2	1.81
Total	110	100

According to the findings, 82 respondents making 74.54% perceived the funding of a Journalist’s project in exchange for continued favorable publicity to one’s organization as quite unethical, 26 respondents making 23.63% felt it was ethical while only 2 respondents standing at 1.81% could not comment.

Butterick (2011) observes that such a practice, as well as those of PR companies inviting Journalists to free lunches, arranging press trips, and giving gifts in order to get favourable coverage for a product...were viewed as corruption (p. 77). She cautioned that there was no guarantee that a Journalist for instance would write an uncritical report about such an organization or product because of such extension of assistance by a public relations practitioner.

In fact, as already noted earlier, publicity should be based on merit and not manipulation. News events are always free of cost as they are dependent on their news values (worth) for publication and any payment for the same, amounts to bribery or corruption which naturally violates the ethical code of conduct for public relations practice globally. Indeed, there was everything wrong with funding a Journalist’s project in return for continued favourable publicity as the practitioner’s judged correctly because it contravenes the International Code of conduct. According to rule 14 of the Code of Athens adopted by the Global International Public Relations Association incorporating all public relations professional bodies in the world, Public Relations practitioners are required to refrain from “using any manipulative methods or techniques designed to create subconscious motivations over which an individual has no control” ([www.ipra.org/](http://www.ipra.org/)).

#### **4.9 Use of blackmail**

Public relations practitioners are custodians of ethical values, shapers of images and enhancers of reputation in the organizations they serve. They are expected to be working round the clock to ensure that their organizations are spotless, upright and trustworthy in the eyes of the public. For the mentioned reasons, practitioners were interviewed to understand their perception on how they would handle a situation that amounted to blackmail, and their responses were:-

**Table 9: Distribution of Public Relations practitioners as per their payment to a Journalist in possession of a damaging story to stop its publication**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	88	80
No	17	15.45
Can't say	5	4.54
Total	110	100

Majority of the respondents most of who claimed would be in panic, candidly stated they would do everything possibly, including making the required payment to ensure that such a story does not see the light of the day. According to the findings, 88 respondents representing 80% of the total interviewed observed they would not think twice knowing the dangers a damaging story could cause to an organization. 17 respondents making 15.45% claimed they would not succumb to such demands, while 5 respondents representing 4.54% opted not to give their comments.

A damaging story can indeed be a scare in an established organization but on the other hand too, concealing information has never been known to be a solution because when the truth eventually erupts, it becomes catastrophic. As advisors and counselors of managements, public relations practitioners' ought to constantly engage and remind such managements on the importance of values of integrity, and the damages that could be caused to organizations if such practices were allowed. The practitioners' need to be professionals, use all the tools available in their trade to avert such crisis, and not spend money to cover-up situations. It will only be short-lived.

Hence, payment to kill a story was not the solution because the media is dynamic, and the same story could still be picked up by other media organizations. The best solution would be to address the situation, be objective in the presentation of facts, and ensure that such is avoided in future. Sincerity while presenting facts, with explanation, could endear the organization to the media and the public at large. This may turn the tide round in the organization's favour, as a sincere outfit.

#### **4.10 Confidentiality**

Confidentiality in public relations practice is a crucial virtue without which the profession's integrity is put at stake. An investigation into the practices of Public Relations practitioners in Kenya on the importance of confidentiality was carried out and the following was the outcome:-

**Table 10: Respondents’ advance disclosure of tendering processes to friends intending to participate in an on- going bidding contest**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	18	16.36
No	92	83.63
Can’t say	-	-
Total	110	100

In an effort to establish whether it was, or was not ethical to assist competing bidders know what others quoted in a tendering contest before submitting their final quotations, 92 public relations respondents interviewed, representing 83.63% outrightly perceived such assistance as unethical. This contrasted sharply with 18 respondents representing 16.36% who perceived such assistance as normal.

In her observation in relation to the study, L’Etang (1996) pointed out that public relations industry already had a tarnished historical reputation as a ‘spin doctor’ profession; hence, it required to show a new standard to society. She noted that the complexity of a business environment required the practitioners to make careful ethical decisions among conflicting interests, stressing that the personal conduct and beliefs of public relations professionals could have an impact on a societal level. She emphasized the importance of ethics, arguing that they would remain the nexus of public relations practice and its professionalization.

Indeed, confidentiality is a critical virtue in any profession and especially in public relations where the role centres on people, reputation, public opinion, integrity, honesty, image and mutual understanding. It would be unthinkable therefore, for a public relations practitioner who cannot be trusted to still be expected to uphold the integrity of the organization, if he could go ahead to leak his organization’s secrets. It is however worth noting that an overwhelming majority of the practitioners realized that it was unethical to reveal procurement secrets to bidders.

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendation**

The feedback obtained from the study points at a glaring challenge touching on the levels of understanding of what constitutes ‘right or wrong’, ‘good or bad’ about ethical behaviours in the practice of public relations in Kenya. With a massive growing interest of youth joining the practice, the now perceived as a ‘walk-in-walk-out’ career, as is sometimes times viewed, since it embraces all and sundry, trained or not, is prone to scandals and professional abuse. Since, the practice is centred on truthfulness, integrity, sincerity and honesty, values that are anchored on any career that devotes its focus on image building of either organizations or individuals, sensitization of those that practice it is critical. This should be done through organized short courses, workshop or seminars.



Kenya's Public Relations Society (PRSK) therefore, has an urgent duty and obligation to ensure that the misunderstood practice of public relations which has been associated with countless flaws, has its status restored, so that it is finally viewed as a respectable career like many other mainstream professions like law, engineering, medicine among others. The move by PRSK seeking standards and regulations through legislation in Parliament so that it is cleaned up for the purpose of accountability should be fasttracked. Unless the professional body is regulated in law, the misconception and poor perception bedeviling it will prosper.

Further, the professional body should actively get involved alongside the Ministry of Education, in the formulation of the PR syllabus to be taught in institutions of higher learning so that an assurance of desirable ethical values is incorporated and taught to all would be practitioners across the board. In this way, all would be practitioners will be conversant with do's and don'ts of the professional practice. As it stands, there is lack of clear policy on ethical issues; hence making the body spineless should there be any accusations of wrong-doing as it cannot hold anyone to account (responsible) as long as membership remains optional, thereby continuing giving the career a bad name.

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