

**2007 Atlas Award Presentation
on International Public Relations**

*International Public Relations Today
The View from Egypt*

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

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Modern public relations as we know it today was relatively new to my country many years ago. But like so much else, Egypt's underlying contribution in communication is still being felt to this day — across the millennia. After all, Egypt is not only the cradle of civilization; it is also the birthplace of “communications” as we know it. For what are hieroglyphics but the first *alphabet*? What is papyrus, but the first *portable* means of written communications? What are those wondrous obelisks, but the first form of *outdoor* messages?

Today, in 2007, as we reflect on the discipline we all share a passion for, it is certainly clear that public relations has come a long way. The new millennium has swept us all into a new kind of economy and society. We are now living in a world of new mind-sets and new ambitions; a world where change is more rapid than at any time in history — yet also a world where time-honored resources, honest two-way communication, ethics, smart people and skillful strategies, still matter. This is the world of public relations today.

Having founded my own company in Cairo some 40 years ago, it gives me a great sense of satisfaction to have been “present at the creation” and to have helped play a role in the evolution of public relations as a respected profession in the Egyptian market. Decades ago, it was confused with advertising, sales or even marketing. Today, the profession has acquired the level of respect and value it deserves. This is evident not just in Egypt, but across many other countries around the globe.

In my capacity as International Public Relations Association (IPRA) world president in 2006, I conducted seminars, workshops, and spoke at various conferences on every continent. My mission was to communicate the concept and role of public relations as the leading force behind successful companies.

After all, it is all about communication. Our profession's central concern is the public's confidence. And make no mistake — in Egypt or anywhere around the world — confidence cannot be bought — it must be *earned*.

Today, I strongly believe that both the public and private sectors in the developed and emerging markets of the world are realizing the true credibility that can be derived from sound public relations work. And they're realizing, too, that PR — dollar for dollar — can *far* exceed the results gained through other means of communication.

After all these years of hard work in public relations, I can see the fruit in the field especially as it evolves in this era of globalization. It is a testament that PR is undergoing a new face for the future — a face where institutions are seeking growth and where the society is facing an increasing pace of change, heightened by awareness across borders as well as greater sophistication.

The future for our industry worldwide looks bright, indeed. But we need to take the practice of public relations to the next level. In doing so, PR practitioners need to step up and dedicate themselves to meeting what I see as our profession's five greatest challenges for the future.

First

Consumers today are bombarded with more messages than they can possibly absorb. It's not just *volume*, it's also *speed*. With today's technological advancements increasing both, unless we reduce our messages to the *absolute essential*, we will never get a second chance. Like they say, when it comes to first impressions, you never get a second chance.

Second

The technological revolution has enabled PR practitioners to communicate instantly across the globe. The flow of information is cheap, easy, fast and at *everyone's* fingertips. But technology in information is also a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it makes communication instant and cheap; on the other, there is no control over the recipient.

Any message can be spread across the globe, *instantly*. Yet what may work in one country may be totally offensive to the culture of another. What may play perfectly well in the American heartland may not necessarily be equally accepted in Scandinavia, Zambia, China, Brazil, Russia, or my home country of Egypt, for example. We have witnessed horror stories about PR communications specialists who have either misunderstood or did not listen carefully enough to in-country experts steeped in local cultures and their unique mores. Yes, we are more interconnected than ever, but make no mistake: *Culture matters* — perhaps today more than ever. We need to learn to listen more; we need to understand local cultures better; and we need to put ourselves in the shoes of those receiving our messages in other countries as much as humanly possible *before* we communicate.

Third

Credibility is lacking. There is increasing doubt over PR's truthfulness. A very small minority of practitioners today are trafficking in what can only bluntly be characterized as intended falsehoods. The result is doubt cast over the industry as a whole. That doubt, in turn, affects each and every one of us as practitioners. We must correct this. The public relations practitioner's only asset is his or her credibility. And with the barrage of mixed messages we're subjected to daily, the public today is craving authenticity, transparency and bluntly: the unadorned truth. PR has to be a serious, noble and honest effort to relate to the public.

Fourth

Media transparency is a worldwide phenomenon facing us all. Some in the media are asking for payment against editorials. IPRA is currently conducting a worldwide survey on this subject and its prevalence across the globe, the results of which will be out in early

2008. This is *serious*. We must do everything possible in our power to stop this unhealthy practice. What is worse is that some practitioners are actually paying. This practice is like a cancer on our profession and it should cease.

Fifth

There are high — and frankly *unrealistic* — expectations being set by non-practitioners on PR's function in the marketplace, more specifically, of what PR can do — that it simply cannot deliver. There are the endless, epic struggles with marketing/product/brand managers who view PR as a magic wand to solve all problems. Hope is not a realistic strategy. We need to set expectations properly.

We also need to train more non-practitioners on how best to use PR. Not only train, but develop a new approach to PR education by drawing on and emphasizing key societal issues such as institutional ethics, the emerging new media, and the growing convergence of public relations and other communications functions such as advertising, marketing, lobbying, government affairs and corporate social responsibility.

I am sure that all of us, as professionals in the industry sharing a common passion, can put our hands and minds together — across industries and time zones — to meet these challenges.

PR practitioners should try to make this a better world. Communication is a key part of our daily lives. Good communication is literally the difference between winning and losing for countries, as it is for companies and individuals.

Public relations should be used in its most noble function — to create better communication among nations by combining wisdom and knowledge, removing differences and enhancing relations among all of us as human beings, whatever one's color, country, religion or other background.

As PR practitioners, more than most other people, we are blessed with the gift of persuasion. But like any gift, it can be used for good — or other purposes.

May we always choose wisely.

About the 2007 Atlas Award Winner – Loula Zaklama

Loula Zaklama's life is an inspiration for not only public relations professionals but for those who struggle to beat the odds. A pioneer in her native Egypt, Ms. Zaklama overcame tremendous obstacles throughout her four-decade career.

In 1962, at the age of 19, Ms. Zaklama founded Radar Advertising Agency, the only private sector advertising agency in a completely state-run economy where granting contracts to private firms was nearly impossible. In 1982, she formed RadaResearch & Public Relations Company to answer the needs of international companies looking for wider Middle East exposure. Her clients include IBM, DaimlerChrysler, Proctor & Gamble, Pfizer as well as a number of Egyptian companies. She is also the communication consultant for various ministries in Egypt.

As an Egyptian woman, Ms. Zaklama transcended traditional gender barriers to become a highly successful businesswoman. She was selected as one of the "50 Arab leading businesswomen in the Middle East" in 2006 by *Forbes* and as one of the "50 Leading Women Entrepreneurs of the World" by the Star Group, sponsored by IBC and *Fortune Magazine*, in 1998.

Ms. Zaklama held the position of world president of the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) where she helped to promote the profession and best practices globally, and is an active member of Gallup International and the. In addition, she teaches undergraduate university courses in public relations and speaks at numerous public relations conferences in Europe, Middle East, USA and Russia. She has also made her presence known on Capitol Hill as part of a delegation of Egyptian thought leaders who frequently visit with members of the U.S. government to help strengthen ties between the United States and Egypt.

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. 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.

Atlas Award Recipients:

1995 – **John M. Reed, APR, Fellow PRSA**, United States

1996 – **José Rolim Valença**, Brazil

Taija Kohara, Japan (Special Posthumous Award)

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

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2007 – **Jack Bergen**, United States

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