

PRISA welcome address

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PRISA Members, conference speakers, partners from industry and academic institutions, delegates from Lesotho, Botswana, Namibia and Cameroon, our sponsors, PRISA Honorary Officers and Chairs of the various committee, distinguished guests, I am humbled by the opportunity to participate at our 59th Conference in the beautiful city of Durban.



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Firstly, let me thank the contributions from the various tracks and panels yesterday – your contribution has set the tone for the conference and we continue today and beyond better equipped to face the challenges facing us as professionals and the industry in general.

I was reminded of a quote by Francis of Assisi: "Start by doing what is necessary, then do what is possible and suddenly you are doing the impossible." It captures for me what I believe should be our attitude as we reflect on the state of our industry and consider what we need to do to restore our position on the back of the great work that was cemented with the formation of PRISA, 59 years ago.

Prof. Verwey raised a key question; are we alive to the potential of a Kodak moment for our industry? Scary thought but necessary because it reminds all of us not to take ourselves and industry for granted.

The PR profession has an internal crisis in a time when the world is yearning for its meaningful contribution. Now more than ever, organisations whether public or private are realising that a good reputation and stable relationships are critical in creating environments conducive for the success of any business.

The internal crisis I am referring to talks to an identity crisis that has resulted in many of us playing around with semantics to get a name that is relevant enough to gain a seat in the centres of power. All this not realising that the industries that rely on our support are more concerned about the value we can add rather than a naming convention. As an example, an

industry that is close to ours, human capital moved from manpower to personnel to human resources and recently, human capital and in spite of all of these names, that industry is single minded about its focus and objective – delivering the people to deliver on organisational objectives. So my question as we deal with this crisis, are we clear as professionals what we are about and how our industry should be positioning itself relative to others or as spin doctors most of us have been trained to become we are peddling smoke and aligning mirrors to mask the fundamental challenges facing our profession.

The challenges are for me two-fold; technical competence and relevance. Yesterday, I sat in the academic tracks because it is important for me that we go back to the basics when it comes to professional development. We cannot continue to talk about a profession when we don't spend time in looking at what are the building blocks that are required to build the professionals. We have to join forces with academic institutions to develop curricula that is relevant but firmly rooted in solid academic theory. The temptation to be relevant is corroding the essence of our profession where we seem to be churning out graduates who are technically competent but strategically inadequate. The reality is that there should be a theory backing technology. My appeal is therefore for us not to be 'excited' but the immediacy of new technologies forgetting that when the technology changes, we still need to have the flexibility to grow with the times – flexibility that can only happen if we understand the fundamentals of our profession through a solid theoretical framework. The definition of PR 'is a strategic communication process that builds beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics. While this is seen as a 2011 by the Public Relations Society of America, the reality is that the fundamentals have not shifted, it is still the same definition associated with the establishment of the Publicity Bureau in the 1900s. While I am not competent to reflect on the history of the industry, I am just illustrating the point that we have to go back to basics and do what we know we have to do and not what is 'fashionable' and 'trendy'. Coco Chanel's skirt was tubular, and David Tlale's is the same but just adapted for the time. Being relevant is important but we need to be clear on what relevance means. For me, relevance is not flowing with every river, it is finding the right boat to navigate all the rivers. Yes, new technologies have disrupted the way we do business, but as one of the speakers yesterday, we cannot be led by technology, we have to use technology to drive our industry. Many years ago, with my first job at the university of South Africa, media clippings used scissors, Prit, a stapler and lots of footsteps as technology. The reason for the clippings remains, we have taken advantage of technology to do it smarter, better and quicker. Therefore, we need to reflect on what is being thrown our way because the Mark Zuckerbergs of this world are developing technologies everyday to make life easier and not for the purpose of making our industry better because that is our role.

So for me, we need to take advantage by beginning to collaborate and perhaps in future sitting with these techies to explain what our function is about and asking them to develop technologies to help is optimise on our output. After all, industries such as health care are doing it already – surgeons are working with IT companies to make it easier for them to operate. So in my view, to become relevant, we have to be proactive and innovative – working with what is already to advance our interests.

With all of the above, there are a lot of exciting opportunities for the profession. Our universities are affording us with research that is not only relevant but we should leverage to re-engineer some aspects. I was excited to hear about the development of Afrocentric theories by some the esteemed Professors Ronel Rensburg and Gary Mersham. Before his passing, Chris Skinner was single minded about that. He and many others are flying the flag for theories out of Africa and are giving the world the run for their money. Where there is a disconnect, is the collaboration between the industry and the academics. I am hopeful through some of the engagements we are having as PRISA, we will be able to build the bridges.

The issues of transformation are close to my heart, not only because of the demographical elements but transformation will foster collaboration, diversity of expertise which can only be for the industry. I know there are some challenges with the recent codes – a reality that goes beyond our industry. But the opportunity lies in continuous engagement until we get to a solution that is mutually beneficial for both the legislators and the industry. Therefore that there is legislation even, means we are recognised as an industry and that is a great starting point of a very long journey, we should all be prepared to walk.

Now looking into PRISA, yesterday, a membership research was presented highlighting one important aspect, value add for members. This research validated what we already know, the intention of our founders remains – we are an industry body tasked to represent the interest of our members.

We have spent most of this year and the latter part of last year working with the PRISA management to do just that but find ways of doing better and smarter noting the dynamic environment in which we operate. We aspire to become a research based centre of excellence that supports the communications industry through quality education, continuous professional development and strategic collaborations.

And this we aim to achieve by:

- Working with organisations and individuals to ensure that professional communication is valued as a critical function in organisations.
- Lobbying for professional accreditation to raise the barrier of entry
- Delivering research-based thought-leadership to foster continuous professional advancement
- Supporting skills development with relevant Continuous Professional Development and best practices for continuous improvement.
- Collaborating with other organisations to build an inclusive and representative community of professional communicators.
- Celebrating and highlighting communication excellence.

However, it is not these statements that will make things work. It is service excellence, relevant information and relationships that will make PRISA become. Our theme for our conference aptly captures our approach going forward. We know now is the time to rise to reclaim our rightful position, but to do that we have to grow ourselves and our profession so we can advance and rise to the challenges of the dynamic environment we are operating in.

How are we going to achieve this given the crisis I alluded today? The industry has got some of the best expertise in the country. It is not the shortage of players that is the problem but the shortage of willing participants in the development of the industry. In my language they say, "Uzo ithola kanjani, uhlezi e khoneni," but since I am in Durban I wish to conclude with Mahatma Ghandi's quotes which I am directing to the PRISA as an organisation and to the PR professionals: "Without action, you aren't going anywhere," and for us to regain our place in industry and restore our image, "Be the change you want to see in the world."

Thank you once again for making the time to be part of this conference. We have yet another exciting day ahead of us. Let us continue the conversations beyond Durban so that no one can drive our industry, without us.

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- **Prism Awards 2020 event cancelled amid coronavirus concerns** 16 Mar 2020
- **Prism Awards 2020 tickets now available** 12 Mar 2020
- **2020 Prism Young Voices announced!** 13 Feb 2020
- **Prism Awards entries and Young Voices deadlines extended** 11 Feb 2020

PRISA



Established in 1957, the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA) represents professionals in public relations and communication management throughout the southern African region and has registered practitioners in Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho, Swaziland and South Africa.

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