



THE NATIONAL BLACK PUBLIC RELATIONS SOCIETY, INC

# State of the PR Industry

Defining & Delivering on the Promise of Diversity

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**white paper**



Survey Designed and Conducted by the National Black Public Relations Society, Inc.  
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# Executive Summary

This white paper, sponsored by the National Black Public Relations Society, Inc. (NBPRS), explores the major trends affecting U.S. communications professionals who identify as members of the larger black diaspora. The 199 respondents to this online survey include those self-identifying as African-American, bi-racial – white/black, black, black British, black/African Brazilian, Hispanic/black/Native American, black Puerto Rican, Caribbean, Latina, mixed, multicultural and Nubian, thus representing the Black diaspora. The NBPRS emailed this online survey to its members and asked that they distribute it to other professionals and associates.

The findings revealed that:

- Progress has been made by U.S. PR practitioners from the black diaspora.** However, the challenge remains in how the industry sustains the progress particularly at the mid- and senior-levels of the profession while breaking down the door of the executive suite. About 50 percent of corporate respondents were at a managerial level and about 10 percent of agency respondents were mid-level professionals. Only one of the practitioners surveyed is considered to be at an executive-level within a major public relations agency, and none surveyed are serving in chief communication officer positions within organizations. Yet, 22 percent of participants reported owning their own firms or consulting practices, generally with fewer than five employees.
- Professionals desire PR career sustainability and career growth;** professionals surveyed desire to stay in the industry and report looking to industry organizations to provide support for them to stay and grow in the profession. Participants are particularly interested in employing sponsors to obtain access to higher positions.
- Networking is critical to the success of black professionals, leading to career advancement and new business development for entrepreneurs;** obtaining senior and executive-level positions is desired among most practitioners, and those who operate consulting firms and agencies desire to grow their public relations businesses.
- Professional development workshops are desired to help black professionals remain competitive and able to deliver value.** Participants desire training in social media; new technologies; convergence of marketing, advertising and PR; and sustainable business and entrepreneurship. Despite many organizations offering such trainings, are these opportunities accessible and cost-effective for entrepreneurs and entry-level or mid-career professionals whose companies don't provide professional development funding?

This **study confirms the trends** reported previously in the public relations literature and should serve to help individuals, companies, firms, professional associations and other organizations **improve the professional life and opportunities of PR professionals who identify as being part of the Black diaspora.**

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# Introduction

## THE DYNAMICS OF THE PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSION HAVE SHIFTED.

PR professionals are expected to have expertise or at least a commanding knowledge in newswriting, social media, videography, project management, speechwriting, relationship building and the list goes on. New technology makes it easier to do more with less resources, and for individuals to mimic and achieve marginal PR successes. PR professionals are downsized or leaving their jobs to pursue their own businesses only to face a highly competitive race to get a few contracts. The National Black Public Relations Society (NBPRS) recognized this shift and appropriately focused its 2014 annual conference on how to equip, adapt, and conquer to support the growth of its members to be fierce competitors in a changing industry.

Fast forward to 2015, the organization saw the opportunity to shift its focus, and potentially reorganize, to support the needs of its members. It would require the thinking of top senior professionals who have shown support of the NBPRS and concern about the industry as a whole. The #PowerPR State of the Industry Summit was conceived and scheduled for October 30, 2015.

As an organization of 500 black public relations professionals, there's no speaking about jobs and contracts without addressing the lack of blacks at the senior level in agencies and corporations, and systematic programs in place to correct the situation. The power to make decisions about who's hired and fired, the stories being told in the media, the images portrayed across multimedia screens, the cultures created within corporations—you name it—it's primarily controlled by white men.

And while there are many individuals and groups interested in diversifying the industry, none have done enough to make a difference. So, gathering leaders in Washington, D.C. is our power move to create solutions. We recognize each would have a story to tell. All would bring their lens, their experiences, and their fight to get to the top. So in an effort to not spend time outlining the issues faced by black PR practitioners, a survey was initiated to create a high-level profile of the industry.

“This white paper is a **result of the survey and serves as a profile** of our members and other Blacks in the PR industry—a way to have a common understanding of where blacks are in the profession, **where they strive to be, and their concerns...**”

This white paper is a result of the survey and serves as a profile of our members and other Blacks in the PR industry—a way to have a common understanding of where blacks are in the profession, where they strive to be, and their concerns, so that the Summit can focus on an actionable strategy that leads to solutions.

Real solutions. Real answers. Real trackable metrics.

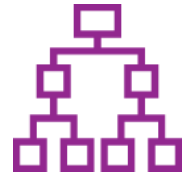
Collaborating to move the diversification of the PR industry from talk to action is the commitment of the NBPRS. #PowerPR is our rallying cry and call to action to the industry.



Deborah Hyman  
Board of Directors and  
Immediate Past President  
National Black Public Relations Society, Inc.

## Key Findings

- **Progress has been made by U.S. PR practitioners from the black diaspora;** however, the challenge remains in how the industry sustains the progress particularly at the mid- and senior-levels of the profession while breaking down the door of the executive suite.
- **Professionals desire PR career sustainability and career growth;** professionals surveyed desire to stay in the industry and report looking to industry organizations to provide support for them to stay and grow in the profession.
- **Networking is critical to the success of black professionals, leading to career advancement and new business development for entrepreneurs;** obtaining senior and executive-level positions is desired among most practitioners, and those who operate consulting firms and agencies desire to grow their public relations businesses.
- **Professional development workshops are desired to help black professionals remain competitive and able to deliver value.** Participants desire training in social media; new technologies; convergence of marketing, advertising and PR; and sustainable business and entrepreneurship. Despite many organizations offering such trainings, are these opportunities accessible and cost-effective for entrepreneurs and entry-level or mid-career professionals whose companies don't provide professional development funding?



## Purpose & Methodology

The purpose of this white paper is to describe the major trends affecting the U.S. communications professionals who identify as members of the larger black diaspora.

The black diaspora includes, but is not limited to, those self-identifying as African-American, bi-racial-white/black, black, black British, black/African Brazilian, Hispanic/black/Native American, black Puerto Rican, Caribbean, Latina, mixed, multicultural and Nubian.

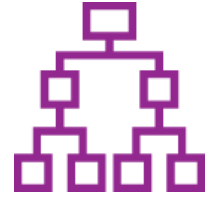
The professionals responding to the survey represented a wide variety of public relations and communications specializations including PR, media relations, corporate communications, social media, public affairs and educators. Students were not part of the target population, but some practitioners also were enrolled as either graduate or undergraduate students. About 75 percent of the respondents had graduate degrees, 60 percent began their career in public relations, about 13 percent spoke a foreign language, and the ages of the respondents ranged from 18 to 74, with about 35 percent in the 35 to 44 years-old age range. About 71 percent of the respondents were female, and 29 percent were male. About 4 percent also identified as Hispanic. Sizes of companies where they work ranged from no other employees to more than 50,000.

The professionals responding to the survey **represented a wide variety of public relations and communications specializations** including PR, media relations, corporate communications, social media, public affairs and educators.

This paper is based upon a national online survey emailed to practitioners around the U.S. using a self-generating sampling technique. Emails were first sent to members of the NBPRS and people who had attended a NBPRS meeting. The survey was completed with 199 respondents who self-identified as a member of the black diaspora as defined above. While those not identifying as part of the black diaspora also completed the survey, they were not included in the analysis. The survey, designed by the NBPRS, included 29 open-ended and multiple-choice questions to provide both quantitative and qualitative data. Participants completed the survey between April 21 and June 1, 2015.

Dr. Rochelle L. Ford, APR, and Cedric Brown of the Department of Public Relations in the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University analyzed the data. The results were discussed with Dr. Clarke Caywood, of Northwestern University, and the NBPRS Board of Directors, and then written into this paper for public distribution and framing of a strategic planning summit to help address critical issues affecting the progress and inclusion of U.S. blacks working in the public relations profession.

## Making Progress?



Progress has been made by people of the black diaspora in public relations; however, the question remains: **how do we sustain the mid- and senior-levels while breaking down the door of the executive suite?**

The survey revealed that practitioners from the black diaspora are obtaining more mid-level positions in the public relations industry and are working in a variety of specializations. Yet, little progress has been made at the most senior and executive positions within agencies and other organizations.

In earlier studies of blacks in public relations, practitioners were disproportionately working in community relations and on projects that were race-related (Appelbaum, Walton & Southerland, 2015; Sha & Ford, 2007). However, this survey showed that black practitioners are dispersed across industry specializations, particularly in areas that are central to modern public relations practices. For instance, the majority of the respondents stated that they spend 50 percent of their efforts on media relations, social media and marketing

communications. Respondents also reported their secondary function areas include social media and event planning. Industry trends are consistent with this finding and suggest that, in general, PR professionals' range of roles will continue to expand.

In this study, blacks are found in all market segments including: corporate (20.6 percent), agency (23.8 percent), government (6.3 percent), nonprofit (12.2 percent), education (10 percent), and other (2.2 percent). Only 1.1 percent were unemployed. Another 22.2 percent were self-employed. Additionally, 20 percent of the respondents reported having more than five other blacks working in communications at their organizations, including themselves.

Another positive development is that blacks are well represented in mid-level positions within agencies, corporations and other types of organizations. About 35.9 percent of corporate respondents were managers and about 15 percent of corporate respondents were directors or senior directors. Likewise, those working in public

relations agencies had titles at the entry (14 percent) and mid-level (18 percent) positions, including account executive (7 percent), coordinator (7 percent), director (11 percent), and manager (7 percent). These percentages are higher than the 4.4 percent that the Current Population Survey reported holding PR managerial positions in 2012.

However, despite some anecdotal examples, black practitioners surveyed in this study have failed to reach the most senior and executive positions of major agencies or corporations. Of the 20.6 percent respondents who work in the corporate sector, none were executive level professionals; none were senior vice presidents or chief communication officers. Several respondents expressed their concerns about being able to reach those executive positions, particularly because of a perceived glass ceiling.





This perception of a glass ceiling existing within corporate America is consistent with the 2014 Harris Poll conducted by CareerBuilder that found 50 percent of African Americans who desire executive positions perceived glass ceilings being present in their organizations that could prevent their advancement. However, in companies that have active diversity and inclusion initiatives especially employee resource groups, African Americans reported having fewer perceptions of the glass ceiling hurting progression, according to the same CareerBuilder/Harris Poll survey.

One of the NBPRS survey's respondents, who is a health care PR mid-level practitioner specializing in social media, said her biggest concern was "advancing to the next level and continuing to grow professionally in a non-diverse environment." Similarly, another survey respondent said, "Breaking into the industry is difficult, but as a black woman it is also difficult to stay in the position because exposure to new projects is limited."

The sentiment is the same among blacks working in public relations agencies. One account executive at an agency with more than 500 employees said the glass ceiling effect is her greatest concern: "Being one of the first black employees to potentially grow to a senior level leadership role within the company and not being able to break through."

According to Forbes (2012), other industries are facing similar struggles; however, other business practices that do not require licensure and are not STEM disciplines, all have higher level of African American managers than public relations (4.4 percent). Such analogous professional service industries include marketing/sales (5.9 percent), human resources (9.1 percent), administration services managers (9 percent) and general managers (5.8 percent).

Only one respondent having an executive title, in this survey, worked at an agency with more than 50 employees, and she was a managing director. Yet, 53 percent of agency respondents reported holding an executive agency position and the majority of them work for companies with 0-5 public relations staffers; and all but one works for an agency with 50 or fewer employees.

About 4.4 percent had titles of founder/owner; 6.7 percent had titles of managing director, 6.7 percent had the title of president and 17.8 percent had titles of CEO/partner/principal. Instead, these executives in this the NBPRS survey are likely to be entrepreneurs.

More than likely, these companies are solo practitioners, which coincides with previous studies of blacks in public relations (Appelbaum, Walton & Southerland, 2015). These entrepreneurs and freelancers bring experience to the table from agencies as well as client-side positions, but they have branched out on their own, some by choice and others because they were downsized from companies or couldn't find new clients or larger agency opportunities.

Despite being in an executive role, one agency founder in the NBPRS survey said that her greatest fear is "that I will stagnate or not find my final path."

While it is unclear from the respondents of the NBPRS survey if these entrepreneurs and small agency executives want to work for large agencies in executive roles or continue to serve as entrepreneurs, American Progress reported that women of color in the U.S. are the fastest growing entrepreneurial segment and that African American women-owned businesses grew by 258 percent between 1997 and 2013 (Ahmad, 2014). The rationale behind this growth of women entrepreneurs stemmed from women's desire for innovation, reactions to the structural obstacles in the traditional workforce that limit women, and other unique challenges in traditional, corporate workplaces that negatively affect women of color by limiting their ability to advance in the workplace (Ahmad, 2014).

## Sustainability & Growth



**Professionals surveyed desire to stay in the industry and reported looking to industry organizations to provide support for them to advance in their careers both within organizations and as entrepreneurs.**

This sentiment matches similar attitudes held by younger professionals in another recent study, where young black and other minority professionals expressed a positive outlook on their careers in public relations. At the same time, these younger professionals have also expressed not getting the kind of mentoring support that they feel would be beneficial to navigating a profession that still faces challenges when it comes to diversity and inclusion (Appelbaum, Walton & Southerland, 2015).

Such support would help alleviate fears like the one expressed by a graduate full-time intern at a major agency in the NBPRS survey, “My biggest worry/fear is looking up in five years and not being in a position that a majority of my peers are — (where I’m) lagging behind and/or struggling to catch up. Trusting your own journey and path to success can be hard.”

According to the NBPRS survey, black practitioners are looking for assistance from the profession for networking, professional development and career advancement, particularly understanding the risks and benefits of sponsors. Only about 19.1 percent of those surveyed by the NBPRS have sponsors who are vested in their careers, offering guidance and critical feedback as well as connecting them to important players and assignments.

“When sponsors fall, the sponsored fall also,” wrote one senior director, at a corporation with more than 50,000 employees and a PR department between 30 and 100 employees, in her NBPRS survey response. She went on to explain that her greatest fears were, “Hitting the ceiling (in my career). (My) compensation may not be equal to my peers of other races, and staying current with tactics as I grow into leadership.”

Similar fears are echoed by black women across many industries (Hewlett & Green, 2015). Earlier studies indicate that black women are nearly three times as likely as white women to aspire to a powerful position with a prestigious title as a means to feeling empowered and being able to empower others. However, these women found it extremely difficult to win sponsorship and felt underscored by the imperative of giving highly qualified, ambitious black women greater visibility and connection opportunities with top executives (Hewlett & Green, 2015).

“My biggest worry/fear is **looking up in five years and not being in a position that a majority of my peers are** – (where I’m) lagging behind and/or struggling to catch up. Trusting your own journey and path to success can be hard...”

says a full-time graduate student intern at an agency



## Networking to Success

Networking is critical to the success of black professionals. Respondents are particularly interested in networking opportunities that would lead toward career advancement opportunities as well as new business cultivation for entrepreneurs and freelancers.

While the industry has focused its attention on entry-level practitioners through the PR Council (formerly Council of PR Firms) career fairs and PRSA Foundation's new partnership with the United Negro College Fund, the NBPRS respondents said that the industry should focus networking opportunities and professional development toward mid- and senior- level professionals to help equip them to move into the most senior level positions.

Practitioners desire more information about how to best utilize mentors and executive coaches in addition to finding and keeping sponsors.

Although about 51.3 percent of the professionals surveyed by the NBPRS said they have mentors, only about 13.7 percent of the NBPRS respondents reported using executive coaches. Many of the executive positions within the public relations industry are found using executive search firms, but it is unclear if respondents are in their databanks and are being identified as potential candidates for consideration. Networking opportunities may enable these professionals to be identified. Utilizing social media such as LinkedIn may be one solution considering about 28 percent of Blacks use LinkedIn, a business-oriented social networking site, according to a recent Pew Research Center report (Krogstad, 2014).

Likewise, the majority of the entrepreneurs in the NBPRS survey said they need opportunities to continue to grow their business through new business development, which would help them to gain new clients or projects to improve their sustainability.

One female agency entrepreneur wrote in the NBPRS survey, "Gaining new clients as I work for myself and I have a goal of growing my business to employ others," was her greatest concern.

"I have a **goal of growing my business** to employ others..."

says one female agency entrepreneur

This NBPRS survey gives greater credence to the need for the industry to focus its attention on enhancing vendor relations and supplier diversity, creating more subcontracting opportunities for large agencies to collaborate with small and minority owned businesses. The American Advertising Federation (AAF) conducted a series of supplier diversity outreach programs through its Mosaic Center that encourages diversity and inclusion in the advertising industry. The public relations industry needs to consider the same. The recommendations from AAF's supplier diversity programs are available [aaf.org](http://aaf.org) (Oliver, Ford & Meyers, 2013).

In addition to the NBPRS, the organizations that might be most useful in providing professional development are the top most mentioned professional association memberships of the NBPRS survey respondents included American Marketing Association (AMA), International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ), and Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). These organizations should take a leadership role in planning such professional development and networking opportunities for black professionals.

While only two respondents were members of the Arthur W. Page Society, an exclusive professional organization for the most senior communications executives at corporations, non-governmental organizations and large agencies, it has the potential to provide leadership in this space creating supplier diversity opportunities and retention and promotion opportunities for black public relations professionals, despite it having few black members itself. Black professionals working in organizations with a Page member should ask those members to be considered for the various executive leadership networking and training opportunities sponsored by the Page Society that are restricted to professionals sponsored by Page members, including Future Leaders Experience and Page Up.



## Professional Development

The **biggest game changer** in the PR industry is “being able to tell a story that is broad enough to **reach a global audience but (also) targeted enough to reach some in a small market.**”

**Professional development workshops are desired to help black professionals remain competitive and able to deliver value. In addition to career advancement and new business development opportunities, professionals said that they recognize the need to remain competitive by continuing to learn about trends and technologies associated with cutting edge strategic public relations and communications management.**

The NBPRS survey respondents are most interested in topics such as social media, particularly analytics and new technologies including wearables, virtual and augmented reality. One survey respondent explained the need and challenges of staying on top of trends, “Social media and technology will continue to be game changers. Periscope wasn’t around a year ago. Now it’s growing. The generation who has had the Internet and Google all of its life is in high school and will soon be an important, decision-making consumer.”

Another important trend is the convergence of marketing, advertising and PR. A NBPRS survey respondent said that for public relations professionals remaining relevant goes beyond just understanding and using social media; they must understand “the convergence of professions: PR, journalism, social media, videography, etc.”

The majority of entrepreneurs shared the importance of continued professional development to help them build sustainable businesses and entrepreneurial endeavors. One entrepreneur the NBPRS survey respondent said that it is critical that she must be “able to communicate the value of PR to convert strategy session clients to paid clients.” This concern rang true with another entrepreneur in the study who said that she believes there are growth opportunities for consultants by providing “public relations strategies for small and medium companies and non-profit organizations.”

On the flip side, other consultants in the survey emphasized the need to internationalize their clientele and provide global business support. One respondent said that it is critical to understand the “use of technology in support of branding strategies that attract global clients.” Another said that the biggest game changer in the PR industry is “being able to tell a story that is broad enough to reach a global audience but (also) targeted enough to reach some in a small market.”

## Diversity & Inclusion



In addition to new technologies, social media, global opportunities and entrepreneurship being among the top concerns of practitioners from the black diaspora, survey respondents often reported deep concerns about the status of diversity and inclusion.

For instance, about 62 percent of the respondents do not have any black men in communication leadership roles in their organizations, and about 37 percent of the respondents' organizations do not have any black female communicators in leadership positions. About 14 percent of organizations do not have any black female communicators working at their organizations, and about 47 percent do not have any black male communicators in their organizations.

While diversity remains a challenge, it is important for the industry to gain insights in how to forthrightly address the diversity and inclusion challenges facing the industry, as well as how to address career advancement and trends from the industry's influential people.

NBPRS conducted the survey to **understand the current condition, hopes and challenges of the black communicator** and present this white paper to **give insight** to the industry on strategies to **help deliver on the promise of diversity.**

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<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/diaspora> any group that has been dispersed outside its traditional homeland, especially involuntarily, as Africans during the trans-Atlantic slave trade

# About NBPRS

Since its founding in 1987, the National Black Public Relations Society Inc. (NBPRS) has served as an advocate for black professionals in public relations, media relations, corporate communications, investor relations, government affairs, community relations, and related fields.

Run by professionals for professionals, NBPRS addresses the diverse needs of its members through programs and partnerships that provide cultural and competitive advantages.

NBPRS has chapters in the major media markets and offers peer-to-peer support, mentorship, networking, job opportunities, internships, and career advancement strategies for professionals engaged in corporate, government, agency, non-profit, and private practice.

## OUR MISSION

NBPRS is the foremost organization for professional image makers and strategists. We invite you to join our network of 500-plus members comprised of public relations administrators, media specialists, government relations directors, and communications professionals.

With the strength of our affiliate chapters throughout the country, NBPRS strives to nurture, enlighten and inform its membership about new technologies and techniques. We work to empower our entrepreneurs and practitioners to network and succeed.

Our goals are to:

- Generate jobs
- Create business partnerships
- Identify networking opportunities
- Encourage entrepreneurship
- Be a resource for minority vendors and supplier services
- Showcase PR professionals who have transformed the industry
- Become a one-stop source for companies seeking qualified diversity candidates
- Give access to a large network of PR professionals offering guidance and support
- Grow our national footprint with membership renewals, new members and student members



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