

# How PR giant Bell Pottinger made itself look bad

By [Paula Keaveney](#)

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The reputation of global PR company [Bell Pottinger](#) has suffered a massive blow. The boss has resigned, clients have walked, the [firm has been expelled](#) from the [Public Relations and Communications Association](#) (PRCA) - and it has now [put itself up for sale](#). All because of its work on a controversial contract in South Africa.



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Bell Pottinger, which has staff, partners and offices in many parts of the world, is headquartered in London. So when the South African political party the [Democratic Alliance](#) wanted to complain about the firm's activities, the London-based PRCA was its chosen route.

The whole issue of ethics and regulation in public relations is a thorny one. In virtually every country, anyone can call themselves a PR practitioner. I am an accredited practitioner with all sorts of qualifications, but there is nothing in law to stop my neighbour, a plumber, from hanging out a sign saying he is a PR officer, too.

But thanks to a drive from industry professionals there have been efforts to promote ethics and ensure some sort of regulation, which practitioners and companies can choose to sign up to.

In the UK, there is the [PRCA](#) (mostly for organisations) and the [CIPR](#) (mostly for individual practitioners). Each has codes of conduct and disciplinary processes. Each can censure and expel. Ethical practitioners hope that clients will equate membership with high standards.

The PRCA's expulsion of Bell Pottinger is the [most serious sanction](#) it can take, and follows an investigation, a provisional ruling and [an appeal](#). But now Bell Pottinger is out, and it cannot apply to rejoin for at least five years.

According to PRCA Director General [Francis Ingham](#):

*“ Bell Pottinger has brought the PR and communications agency into disrepute ... The PRCA has never before passed down such a damning indictment of an agency's behaviour.*

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Bell Pottinger was founded in part by Sir Tim (now Lord) Bell in 1987. Advising former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher on her presentational style, he became one of the [biggest names in PR](#). The firm did not shy away from [controversial clients](#), who included former South African president FW de Klerk, Asma al-Assad, the wife of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, and the South African athlete Oscar Pistorius, after he was accused of murder. Lord Bell himself resigned from the company last year. And in an [interview with the BBC's Newsnight](#) (which was twice interrupted by his mobile phone ringing) he said this latest episode was “almost certainly” the end.

Experts in keeping up appearances, the firm no doubt regrets the work it carried out for the wealthy [Gupta family](#), which has close links to South Africa's president Jacob Zuma.

The British PR firm got into trouble with a social media “economic emancipation campaign” in which the phrase “white monopoly capital” was said to have been deliberately, or irresponsibly, used, stirring up racial tension.

South Africa's opposition [Democratic Alliance accused](#) Bell Pottinger of a “hateful and divisive campaign to divide South Africa along the lines of race”.

The scandal led to resignations – and the loss of clients. Britain's biggest bank, HSBC, has said it would [no longer use Bell Pottinger](#). A Swiss luxury company headed by a South African businessman, a South African investment group, and Acacia, which owns gold mines in Tanzania, are also [reportedly off the books](#).

The damage to the company's reputation is immense. While Bell Pottinger did take on work for clients which some of us find offensive or "to be avoided", there is a difference between a client with a bad reputation deserving some help, and creating a bad reputation through the very act of communication.

## **Is all publicity still good publicity?**

Will nations and companies still want to hire the company in the future? Some will probably take the attitude that recent events do not affect the organisation's ability to carry out its work.

But will journalists and other PR audiences be ready to accept the firm's messages? Probably not. The first response of any journalist contacted by a Bell Pottinger spokesperson will surely be to think of this damning incident. It will be tough for any lobbying campaign to carry conviction with the Bell Pottinger name attached.

Of course, being expelled from a professional association does not take away the ability to practice. The Democratic Alliance itself has pointed out that Bell Pottinger can still work in South Africa.

But PR depends on the ability to win client accounts – by convincing them that you will protect and enhance their reputation. It is difficult to see how an organisation which has effectively trashed its own reputation can protect someone else's.

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