

The use of public relations for forging mutual understanding between colleges of education and their publics in Nigeria

Harvey G.O. Igben, PhD

Department of Mass Communication, Delta State University, Abraka

Maureen Ugbome

College of Education Agbor

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ABSTRACT: *This paper explores how the public relations can positively influence the relationship between the colleges of education and their publics. The study which used the College of Education as a case study, argues that public relations as an important aspect of every educational institution management and consequently it could be used to build healthy relationships with the publics and erode unfavourable rumors and stories that could drive Colleges into crisis. The study which relied on personal interview and ethnographic study of public relations related documents of the College of Education discovered that the public relations unit relied heavily on notice board publications, internal and external memos, college events as major tools to disseminate information to publics of the College. The findings further showed that there was heavy use of community relations activities by the college to build healthy relationships with her host community.*

KEYWORDS: Public relations, image building, publics, tertiary institution

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable positive relationship with strategic publics is the concern of many corporate bodies including the colleges of education in Nigeria, but quite a few can achieve the desired destination relationally. The result of such public relations engagement varies as different organizations often adopt different communication strategies. A growing trend in the corporate world is the creation of an office for corporate communications or public relations to facilitate the propagation of an organization's mission. Quite often, the office has a cross-functional responsibility of maintaining a constant link with the public and with all functional units of an organisation including top management. Its operations vary from one organisation to another principally because of differences in mission, vision, goals, values and the products that an organization is established to offer its customers. This paper is concerned with identification of the influence of public relations on the Colleges of Education, in the process of building and sustaining a healthy relationship with relevant publics, using Delta State College of Education Agbor as a case study.

The purpose or functions of public relations in the administration of tertiary institutions is to advance the objectives of the institutions as formal organisations. Public relations must therefore be geared towards achieving the organizational goals established by the institutions administration and in this instance, College of Education, Agbor. College of Education Agbor relations with its publics cannot be said to be the preserve of public relations practitioners alone. All members of the College, especially those in leadership, management and supervisory positions have a public relations role to play, all of which are coordinated by the public relations practitioner to inform the public with a holistic image of the College.

Several definitions of public relations exist in the attempt by professionals and scholars in the field to secure clarification for the public relations field. However, few of them are highlighted below. Public relations has become accepted as a highly effective tool in modern business management in recent times, its influence is being felt on both big and small firms. With the influence of even greater expansion, it is important for management of organizations including tertiary institutions to understand its potentials and limitations. Nwokoye (2008) defines public relations as the activities of corporation, unions, government or other organizations for building and marketing sound and productive relation, with strategic publics such as customers, employees and stake holders and with the public at large, to adapt itself to its environment and interprets itself to the society.

Public relations is also described as a management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies policies and procedures of an individual or an organization with the public interest and execute a programme of action to earn public understanding and acceptance. Chukwu (2012) states that public relations practice is “a management philosophy aimed at doing everything possible to create good relationship between an organization and its public”. Public relations is aimed at making friends for the organization and building internal and external good will on the reasonable assumption that these are strongly needed for an organization to remain in business and make profit. With the increase in the activities of an organization, there is need for an adequate communication between the organization and those who in one way or the other are affected by these activities of the organization while wanting to remain liable. They need to have good relationship with its employees, consumers of its products and services, future investors, shareholders and in fact the entire publics. As an organization specialized in manufacturing or offering services, it needs to show itself to existing or potential customers that it is up to date.

The foregoing definitions tend to support the use of public relations activities for building and sustaining relationship between an organization and its diverse publics within the purview of a systematized framework. For instance, in Nwokoye’s postulation, in which public relations is regarded as a corporate activity for establishing and promoting fruitful relationship with diverse publics, he indirectly infers interdependent relationship between an organization and its divers publics. This position is corroborated by Chukwu as he argues that public relations is the strong commitment of an organization to ensure it incorporates the interest of its diverse publics in whatever it does. The idea is a holistic view of interdependent relationship that exist between the organization and its publics which suggests that doing less in policy formulation and corporate behaviour would meet rejection by strategic publics. This understanding imposes the drive to ensure that everything was done to meet public acceptance. If public acceptance is a paramount consideration in the corporate policy formulation of organisation, it is a recognition of the existence

of corporate policy and action as orbiting within the framework of a systemic interaction. That is the interest of the organization is pursued only if such pursuit is inclusive of the interest of the diverse strategic publics of the organization.

Edoga and Ani (2001) noted that a company should deliberately plan and execute a continuous public relations programme to develop a good relationship between it and the various publics and amongst other objectives that are being sought with public relations. Stressing the position of public relations in the country, Olawnoru (2013) notes that most officials occupying the public relations positions of various organisation in the country today are not professionals. They generally have a fair knowledge of what they are supposed to do.

From historical context, Colleges of Education in Nigeria were established to produce quality teachers in Nigeria. In particular, the College of Education, Agbor was established in October 1979 by the former Bendel State Government with the objective of supporting the process of producing high quality teachers in the country. It started as a technical school which later became a College of Education. Its programmes lead to the award of the Nigeria Certificate Education, NCE, and through its affiliation with the Delta State University, Abraka, and University of Benin it also awards a Bachelor and post graduate degrees in Education (B.Ed).

Colleges of Education are key players in our society today and their role in the academic environment is considered as a backbone for the country's economic growth in this twentieth century. This is with a reference to strengthening the quality of the learning process and knowledge delivery.

College of Education Agbor as an institution or organization interacts with the students, members of its staff, parents, teachers, association, the management, the host community, governing council, the state and the federal government, and the National Commission for Colleges of Education, NCCE. These represent its strategic publics. This implies that the activities performed by College of Education Agbor in one way or the other affect those afore mentioned publics. Therefore, to maintain its public relations with those bodies, the College of Education, Agbor must at all time try to create a rapport and understanding or goodwill with all these bodies. It achieves this through supply of relevant fact based information to the various strategic publics as well as listening to feedback from these publics by allowing the free flow of information, paying of claims as at when due to the staff, engaging in proper and standard academic work, standing by the rules and regulations of NCCE in the performance of its activities.

Management of College of Education, Agbor is now aware that public relations does not only ensure good relation with the relevant publics but can strive towards improved corporate image with the potential for increased students patronage. It is in the light of the importance attached to public relations that this study seeks to appraise the influence of public relations practices in the College of Education, Agbor. The idea that informed the use of the College of Education as a case study was born out of the fact that it is a tertiary institution that is more broaden in its exposure to diverse category of students' population ranging from certificate stage to bachelor, masters and through doctorate degrees in teaching related field.

Publics of College of Education, Agbor

As earlier mentioned above, the institution interacts with different segments of the publics who by implication constitute the framework of its relevant publics. Below are the strategic publics of the College of education, Agbor:

1. Delta State Government
2. The Governing Council
3. The staff of the College including retire, current and potential staff.
4. The students' population including former, current and potential students
5. Her host community
6. Parents
7. Unions including College of Education Academic Staff Union, COEASU, Senior Staff Union of College of Education of Nigeria, SSUCOEN, Non-Academic Staff Union, NASU, Student union government, SUG and Alumni
8. National Commission for Colleges of Education, NCCE etc.

College of Education public relations PR Tools and activities

The College uses proven public relations tools and activities to promote positive attitudes and behaviours towards the College. It employs the use of the following in building the corporate image of the college:

1. Media Relations. This is done through media statements, media tours, media conferences and press releases.
2. Advertorials. This tool is used to inform the public on the sales of forms, vacancies etc
3. Social media include School websites, Facebook page and Whatsap Group.
4. Newsletters on its activities
5. Communities relations

This is one of its public relations activities in which each year, a member of the host community is employed as a Liaison officer and at the end of that service year, another liaison officer is employed. This is done to have mutual relationship with the host community.

6. Gifts items.

At yuletide, various Christmas gifts are shared to the employees through the platform of employee relations.

7. The College also strives to maintain cordial relationship with the different category of staff. These staff, which include teaching, and non-teaching staff are given the opportunity to be actively involved in unionism. At the end of each year, the staff are rewarded with different forms of prizes and packages. Staff and their parents' funerals activities receive the unflinching support of the college authorities. These are some of the ways of making the staff to have a good sense of belonging.

8. Religions activities are also sponsored from time to time. This is done to assure the staff and students of the management interest in their spiritual well-being and protection as such meetings end with prayers for the college community.

9. The PR office distributes newspapers and calendars to the college staff.

10. The PR office in conjunction with the Student Union Government, SUG, identify with the students' interest and challenges. Through this, the PR office fosters an enabling environment for learning to take place.

11. The public relations office liaises between the Governing Council and the state government to allow for free flow of interactions between.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on public relations in terms of relationships between institutions and their publics for effective management of tertiary institutions has been well documented (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006; White & Dozier, 1992; Dozier, 1990). Tianping (2003) indicated that public relations is a basic function of a modern school's management. Kotler (2003) further wrote that the practices of public relations help build good relations with organisation's diverse publics and obtain favourable publicity, build up a good corporate image and wade off unfavourable rumours and stories. Therefore, public relations tools when effectively employed will enhance the image and relationship of the various stakeholders of College of Education, Agbor. It must be echoed that a search for literature shows that the tools employed by public relations to disseminate information to stakeholders of the College to build relationships has been under researched. This paper was therefore conducted to address this research gap.

The aim of this paper is to establish the influence of public relations in the effective management of colleges of education in Nigeria with special reference to the College of Education Agbor. This aim unfolds the following objectives: (I) To identify the tools utilized by public relations in the College of Education Agbor for building relationships with its publics. (II) To identify PR practices employed by the public relations unit to build good corporate image for the College of Education, Agbor.

This work reviewed literature on public relations including the tools utilized for image building approaches. Accessible literature reveals that public relations is not new and its modern-day origins in the United States can be traced as far back as 1807 with President Jefferson's address to Congress (Lancaster, 2005). According to Moore and Kalupa (2007) public relations as practiced today is a twentieth century American phenomenon and its fundamental elements of informing people, persuading people and integrating people were basic to earliest society just as they are today.

Moore and Kalupa (2007) further asserted that the need for communications among organisations and their publics is attested to by the fact that public relations occupy a dominant role in the economy today and exists as an essential middleman between the corporation and its publics. Hence, public relations functions cannot be integrated into other areas since these functions cannot be managed strategically (Grunig et al., 2006). Public relations is therefore a management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends (Cutlip, Center, and Broom, 2006).

Public Relations practice is deliberate, planned and sustained to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its public. PR consists of all forms of planned communication, outwards and inwards, between an organization and its publics for achieving specific objectives concerning mutual understanding (Jefkins, 2006). Jefkins presents public relations as a management function, which uses the attributes of management for example, planning, collaborative decision making, and research to foster the organization's ability to build

mutually beneficial relationships on which the corporate vision and mission depend. These literatures also present public relations as communication management, which focuses on the flow of communication between an organization and its publics to achieve effective relationships. These literatures went further to present public relations as relationship management, so that communication is seen as a property of those relationships rather than the conduit between organizations and public.

The management function that monitors and manages opinions of the general public towards an organization is the use of public relations (Moore & Kalupa, 2007). The objectives of public relations is to manage misconceptions for unfounded opinions not to tarnish the image and operations of an organisation. Wells, Burnet, and Moriarty, (2005) also support this view and stressed that public relations objectives focus on creating credibility, delivering information, building positive images, changing stakeholders' attitudes, opinions, or behaviors about a company. Wells et al., (2005) further opined that public relations practitioners have many tools to establish and enhance a positive image of an organisation and its products among its various publics. Hence, the various tools employed by public relations practitioners to deliver his messages to the publics of an organisation include speeches, sponsorships, events, corporate advertising, press releases, websites, internal publications and notice boards (Belch & Belch, 2001; Lancaster, 2005; Moore & Kalupa, 2007; Palmer, 2000; Wells et al., 2005).

According to Palmer (2000), sponsorship involves investment in an event or cause in order that an organisation can through it chieve its objectives. Thus, through events, an organisation can achieve objectives such as increase in awareness level, reputation enhancement and image building. Palmer (2000) additionally stated that major events are an opportunity for two-way dialogue between the organisation and the media. Event and sponsorship in the words of Duncan (2002) are designed to create involvement and intensify the marketing communications activities in an organisation. Lancaster (2005) believe that key individuals can be invited to artistic events and such key individuals can be targeted, contacted, entertained and result in long term relationships building.

Moore and Kalupa (2007) also were of the view that events play an important part in changing attitudes and opinions. The authors further assert that events provide information that often induces a change of mind. Clow and Baack (2007) further mention that since event is an opportunity for organisation to have a dialogue with their publics, public relations professional should always amplify responsibility for positive outcomes of events and increase the desirable outcome in the eyes of the publics. Therefore, public relations practitioners must recognize the importance of events in transforming passive attitudes into positive opinion on controversial issues.

Building Corporate Image Using Public Relations

Most organisations today place high emphasis on external communication such as marketing, branding and image management, with lesser attention on internal communications (Chong, 2007). According to Pickton and Broderick (2005) image is the perception of the company by its publics. The authors emphasized that an organisation have many images, not one, because each target audience is affected by its own interest and contacts. Clow and Baack (2007) stressed that a strong company image, which took years to build, may be destroyed in just a few weeks or months by

negative publicity and events. Therefore, the role of public relations professional is to build strong company image through public relations activities (Clow & Baack, 2007).

Wells et al.,(2005) mentioned employee relations, media relations, corporate relations, financial relations, public affairs and community relations as types of relations that public relations professionals of an organisation deal with. Dortok (2006) concedes that building a positive image for an organisation, is often considered to be crucial to paying more attention to employees as they are considered one of the most trusted information sources of an organisation. Ledingham and Bruning (2000) further indicated that communication becomes a vehicle used by an organisation to initiate, develop, maintain and repair mutually productive relationships. Thus, employees' relations involves internal marketing which communicate an effort aimed at informing employees concerning marketing programmes as well as encouraging their support which affect the image of the organisation (Wells et al., 2005).

Hutton, Goodman, Alexander and Genest, (2001) argued that companies with extensive corporate communication strategies are more likely to have strong reputations. Thus, as companies focus on managing relationship with its publics the more likely they are to have a strong reputation. Dolphin (2004) argued that corporate reputation can win competitive advantages for an organisation in a crowded marketplace. Wells et al., (2005) added that a successful relationship between an organisation and its strategic publics depends on public relations professional's commitment to honesty, accuracy and professionalism. Therefore, when these qualities are tarnished, the public relations professional cannot function effectively as a liaison between a company and the publics (Wells et al., 2005).

Clow and Baack (2007) echoed that corporate reputation is extremely vulnerable and extremely valuable hence good reputation is hard to build and cannot be bought by an organisation. In the words of Leeper (2004) recognizing community as the context within which organisations operate and recognizing the need for organisations to establish strong communities, is a good backdrop for realizing idealistic role of public relations. This view is supported by Post, Preston and Sachs, (2002) who pointed to the fact that a company's wealth and its license to operate are influenced by its relationship with stakeholders. Therefore, active and continuing participation within a community helps to maintain and enhance cordial relationship to the benefit of both the institution and the community at large. Newsom, Turk and Kruckeberg (2004) emphasized that public encompasses any group of people who are tied together however loosely, by some common interest or concern and who have consequences for an organisation. Consequently, lack of community relations activities automatically limits the ability of public relations departments of the private universities to perform their functions effectively in building relationships. Beavers-Moss (2001) conclusively stated that building credibility and trustworthiness are the main issues in public relations. In view of this, public relations practitioners must recognize the importance of events and sponsorships in transforming passive attitudes into positive opinion on controversial issues.

The Role of the Educational Public Relations Practitioner

The role public relations usually plays in educational institutions is to manage the flow of both internal and external communication. Public relations departments manage their organisation's reputation with various groups including internal and external publics. According to Sietel (2009)

public relations practice promotes two-way communications based on research through a multimedia. The traditional role of the educational public relations specialist has been that of a scribe and paper mover, whose purpose typically was to inform and often to publicize. For the most part, the duties of the educational public relations specialist or practitioner was the recording and publishing of minutes of board meetings, the development of brochures for financial campaigns and even the supervision of the school newspaper.

Today however, the role of the educational public relations practitioner has broadened largely. Flatt (2002) listed twenty (20) roles for the contemporary public relations specialist. These leadership roles emphasized a variety of skills which include: publicizing, advertising, marketing, of existing and new products and services, editing and knowing basic graphic design, conducting budget and building referenda campaigns, public relations in service for administrators and staff, relating effectively to adults and youths in the community, problem solving situations, dealing with oral and written complains and organizing and administering communications plans for schools crisis, keeping accurate district school public relations records, determining alternative features and serving not only as the district peacemaker and public conscience, but also as one of the institutions key advisors, which includes speaking for the institutions on occasions.

Role of Public Relations in Educational Institutions

The public relations plays key role in educational institutions through management of the flow of both internal and external communications. Public relations departments in educational set up do manage their organization's reputations with various groups including internal and external publics. This is what Seitel (2009) implies when he said that public relations practice is a on two-way communication with the support of multimedia. According to Seitel, public relations practice in the USA, is therefore accorded a prominent role in management from a position as a Vice President with board representation. The Executive Vice President presides over specialized functional areas headed by highly placed directors that oversee specific activities and publics. However, the case is different in Nigeria. Public relations do not have that opportunity. Contrary to what exist in the USA, public relations practice in Nigerian educational institutions are founded on disseminations of information that usually comes from management, with the public relations practitioner completely excluded from the process of generating the information. This position reduces the PR practitioner to the status of an 'errand boy' who does the bidding of the master without raising any question. A public relations practitioner reports through a bureaucratic process as he or she is not accorded management status. In the case of Colleges of Education, the public relations officer report through the Registrar to the provost in College of Education, Agbor.

Theoretical framework

The study is hinged on the system theory. System theory is a useful way of seeing the role of public relations in an organization in relation to its public as interconnected units in which an action in one unit stimulates a reaction in other units. It looks at asset or objects in entities that are interrelated with one another. The administrative unit within the college responsible for informing, educating and persuading constituents through the media and other communication techniques and strategies is the public relations or public affairs office. Public relations as a management function focuses on telling the story of the college, its mission, purpose, history, traditions and requirements, to a diverse group of publics and stakeholders important to the success of the institution. Public relations plays

an important role in communicating the aims, objectives and needs of higher education in the late 19th century (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006). As the college became a more complex institution with a growing contingent of constituents, the need for and role of public relations became increasingly important. Public relations plays a vital role in helping the college administrators articulate their aspirations, goals, objectives, and needs to a diverse group of constituents. Such articulation is meaningful only when the public relations policies and activities regard entire stakeholders to the college as inter-related entities in which the action of one entity is capable of stimulating reaction from another entity or the whole. The implication is that the behaviour of internal publics in the context of system theory has the potential of influencing the attitude of external publics of an organization the College of Education inclusive. Today's public oriented research institutes are competing for the best undergraduate and graduate students as well as superior department, acquiring resources for building new facilities, maintaining their physical plants, and providing a range of educational, cultural and entertainment services for students and the public in some cases. All these needs are supported by the work and efforts of a public relations office whose function is to communicate the worth and merit of the university to a variety of constituents including state legislators, wealthy donors, corporate and philanthropic foundations, and alumni. Although a variety of strategies are used to communicate the college worth and merit, deploying news media coverage is an essential component of this effort.

CONCLUSION

Corporate image is extremely valuable and extremely vulnerable (Clow and Baack, 2007). Good reputations are hard to build and cannot be bought. One of the public relations office responsibilities is to protect the image of the College to its relevant publics. Building good relationships with students, employees and the media helps to obtain a favourable publicity, build up a corporate image and hold off unfavourable rumours and stocks (Kotler, 2003).

From the study, the public relations unit of the college is building the image of the college. However, tools that can bring the college face to face with their publics to encourage two-way dialogue to build relationships have not been fully utilized. This has led to a poor image perception of the college with the resultant effect of a progressive drop in the population of students in the past 4 – 5 years.

Each of the college publics needs to have a favourable perception of her corporate image as each public is affected by its own interest.

Recommendations

1. The public relations department needs to be equipped for proactive public relations activities.
2. The confidence of the College publics needs to be restored to position the College as an academic leader and not follower especially in the face of the stiff competition in the academic market place.
3. There is need to showcase the positive image of the college in terms of high academic performance, quality staff (both teaching and non-teaching) , good academic structure as well as cordial relationship between lecturer and student.

4. The unit should also be given an official means of transportation, equipment to facilitate information communication and management and an office with schedule officers for different PR functions.
5. Finally, personnel of the PR unit should be trained periodically to acquire the conceptual knowledge and technical skills required to relate effectively with the different publics of the College.

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