ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Appraising Media Relations Strategies in Establishments in Rivers State

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Abstract

The herculean task of discharging the media relations role is in the front burner. The role of media relations is quite enormous and those roles they perform are attacked from their foundation, to the extent that the general goal of their unavoidable role is gradually depleting. However, before the attack on them — what are their roles like and how have they advanced on these roles and, with the seeming challenges in the course of performing their roles — what are the remedies to stemming the reoccurring tide of attacks on them. It is the salient and pertinent answers to these questions that this work seeks to unravel. In order to get it right, journalists must practice putting into consideration the ethics and laws of the profession. The answers to these questions would place media relations practitioners on a sound pedestal, which will enthrone a lasting road map and platform for the teeming practitioners in the field, as the remedies to be proffered would be the actual roadmap for them to charta new course to performance. It is against the foregoing that this work is pertinent.

Keywords: Appraising, Media, Public Relation, Media Relations, Strategies.

Introduction

Public Relations parades lots of tools for advancement of its statutory and basic roles. Its major area of interest is creating synergy on the following: investor relations, community relations, and employers' relations. These interests robustly appear in various institutions, corporations and agencies. To advance further on these roles, the public relations strategy must include the arrangement of special events, relationship with advanced research and evaluation, organizing speeches and other tools of communication for development, and enhancement of the practice. It is for this reason that Dustin (2008) agrees that for Public Relations the:

> ...general principles of practice in each of these areas often include the planning of special effects, developing relationship with target audiences, doing research and evaluation, strategic planning and audience analysis, writing speeches and using internal communication (p.1).

Public relations, therefore, is generally more closely identified with a company or organization's management, which presupposes that public relations, since it is management tilting, is majorly concerned with the handling of communication strategies targeted at influencing attitude. Sommers, (2009, p.5) corroborates this assertion thus:"...and it typically involves the development and executions of communication strategies designed to influence attitudes of specific groups/ or public toward the organization."

Essentially, therefore, Public Relations is solely preoccupied with communication using diverse means to advance its purpose of:

- Talking to people/organizations
- Dialoguing with government and various agencies.

Thus, the veritable tool or platform to realize this goal is communication. Hence, Jefkins and Yadin (1988, p.l) maintain that public relations is, therefore, a form of communication. It applies to every sort of organizations, commercial or non-commercial, in the public or private sector. It is far bigger than marketing or advertising.

In the midst of these general principles, it is

evident that media relations is the platform on which public relations has advanced its responsibility. However, one common thing across all tests in public relations is an in-depth discussion of media relations (Turk & Snediker, 1986). Therefore, public relations flourishes greatly with the utilization of media relations platform, which must be systematically and purposefully, amongst other things, planned for mutual relationship between the parties concerned. "Media relations can be defined as the systematic, planned, purposeful and mutually beneficial relationship between journalists in the mass media and public relations practitioners" (Kendall, 1996; Lesley, 1991; Miller, 1984; Guth & Marsh, 2003 cited in Dustin, 2008, p.2).

Media relations, thus, involves lots of activities like development and maintenance of effective communication with representatives of the print and broadcast media in order to facilitate the flow of information to the public, communicating to the right audience through the right medium at the right time, providing media with your key messages, establishing and maintaining relationship with reporters who cover stories relevant to an organization and the business it is performing (Sommer, 2009, p.4).Sommer (2009) goes on to establish that the objectives of media relations is to communicate information about the organization and its goal is to educate the public and foster positive public perception. Communication is key in public relations, as its understanding and adherence create room for harmony. No wonder, in a similar fashion, Offonry (1985) as cited by Uzoh (2005, p.32) maintains that public relations "is the business of creating and maintaining public understanding and support through effective communication". In doing this, the media (press) must rise up to the challenge, given their unavoidable responsibility, because from time, the press has been playing the most noticeable and fundamental roles in running the society (Udoudo, 2010, p.133). Even though, it is about media relations, it still boils down to the publics, the audience, which is the society at large. Therefore, the media, through their function in whatever capacity must meet the needs of the society.

Having laid bare the consensus of public and media relations, this work evaluates media relations strategies.

Public Relations/Media Relations Defined

There are different definitions or conceptions and misconceptions of public relations from scholars with diverse backgrounds in the public relations field. It is necessary, therefore, to present the views of these scholars for proper grasping of this study area.

To this end, Okafor, (2002, p.50) citing *Webster's New International Dictionary, Third Edition* says that public relations is:

> the promotion of rapport and goodwill between a person, firm or institution and other persons, firms or institutions special publics or the community at large through the distribution of interpretative material, the development of neighbourly interchange and the assessment of public reactions. The degree of understanding and goodwill achieved between an individual, organization or institution and the public, the application of the techniques for achieving this relationship, the action or science of developing reciprocal understanding.

Public relations is not solely that of polishing a battered or tarnished image or arranging a favourable image for the corporate outfit. If public relations can be viewed from the two perspectives, as well as others that public relations does not represent, then, it should be seen as misconceptions. No wonder, Jefkins and Yadin, (1998, p.1) succinctly say: "If you mean trying to create a favourable image or a favourable climate of opinion, or trying to polish a tarnished image... these are misconceptions".

However, Jefkin and Yadin, (1988, pp.l-2) did not abandon their audience in the dungeon of this

confusion of what public relations is not. They posit that "Public relations is, therefore, a form of communication. It applies to every sort of organization, commercial or non-commercial, in the public or private sector. It is far bigger than marketing, and existed long before they did."So, public relations is about the publics, as well as the media, what value their organization is endowed with. It is the value that makes for the confidence the public would have on the organization. This must have prompted Johnson and Nworgu (2011, p.274) to exemplify what public relations should be thus: "Public relations now concerns itself with providing the press and the publics with prompt actions for the purpose of selling a company's goods and services to the various publics."

The foregoing implies that the whole essence of public relations is communication and its effectiveness is putting corporate entity in a vintage position. It is, therefore, for this reason that Nwosu (2005, p.10) opines that the effective and efficient management of any organization as a business organization hinges on communication as the catalyst, pivot, life-wire and their fundamental key to success."Nwosu (2005) goes on to aver that communication is the frontier of effective public relations practice and that "researchers have again shown that the success or failure of any manager (his effectiveness and efficiency or otherwise) is strongly based on how he handles communication and information management".

However, apart from communication being the life-wire of the practice of public relations, there are other variables that must be in place for public relations to be regarded as touching all spheres of life, which is the essence of life's existence. The definition canvassed by the editor of the public relations news of New York, as cited by Okafor (2002, p.50), explains that: "public relations is the management function which evaluates public attitude, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organization with the interest, and plans and executes a programme of action to earn public understanding and acceptance."

Importantly, this definition is expedient because it is the most embracing of the definitions — touching on diverse issues — attitudes, procedures, policies, etc. However, public relations is not about public deception or cover up. It has nothing to do with inefficiency, incompetence, promises that are not intended to be met, neither is it supposed to be thriving in propaganda (in the negative perspective). Okafor (2002, p.51) emphatically established that: "Public relations is all about reality, truth, and social responsibility. It is deliberate, planned, systematic, programmed and sustained."

Communication should be frank and geared towards telling the public the truth they should know, hence Guth and Marsh as cited by Dustin (2008, p.3) state, "In brief, our plan is, frankly and openly, on behalf of business concerns and public institutions, to supply, the press and public of the United States prompt and accurate information concerning subjects which is of value and interest to the public to know about."Therefore, it is their fear of the maladies in practice that necessitates public relations practitioners to engage in cover ups, thereby preventing the media from identifying these maladies and scuttling the relations between public relations practitioners and media with its resultant effect as battered image/relations. Having laid bare the facts via the definition of public relations, it is also imperative to extrapolate Media Relations.

In any effort to define media relations, "we must examine the word relationship and we must further seek to define public relations through what public relations practitioners do... we must keep the concept of the relationship in mind" (Dustin, 2008, p.4). With the captured scenario in mind, media relations entail the synergy that supposedly should exist between the public relations practitioner and the journalist. So, why should this synergy exist?"It is a good way to reach a large or general audience... to increase awareness, create positive reputation, dissemination messages from the point-of-view of the organization" (Dustin, 2008, p.5). Secondly, to serve as a credible third party for public relations practitioners (Geary, 2005),Sommers (2009, p.4)

establishes that media relations is majorly:

- Communicating the right message to the right audience through the right medium at the right time.
- Providing the media with your key messages.
- Establishing and maintaining relationship with reporters who covers stories relevant to an organization and the business it performs.
- The development and maintenance of effective communication with representatives of the print and broadcast media in order to facilitate the flow of information to the public by experiencing programmes and activities; answering media inquires; and supplying feature, background, and current information.

To Jefkins and Yadin, (1998, p.78), "the role of press relations is to achieve maximum publication or broadcasting of PR information in order to create knowledge and understanding". They note further that the object of press relations is to "create knowledge and understanding; not to print what the client or employer wants to see in print or to gain 'favourable mentions'". It is important to note that press relations is synonymous with media relations. So, basically, media relations is preoccupied and supposed to publish materials that are of interest and value (Jefkin & Yadin, 1998, p.78; Dustin, 2008, p.2). And when they succeed in doing this, they will earn not only confidence, but trust, which will make space for them. Hence, Baran (2008, p.355) maintains: "media relations require that the public relations professional maintain good relationships with professionals in the media, understand their deadlines and other constraints, and earn their trust."

Nexus Between Public Relations and Media Relations

Given their various goals and targets, which is about communication, it will be absurd to say that the two entities can work in isolation. Obviously, public relations and media go hand in hand. Undoubtedly, there is a link or a synergy between PR and media relations. Personally, I will describe both as Siamese twins, linked together by providence. Infact, to give credence to this, Ndolo (2011, p.42) opines that "public relations practitioners rely a great deal on mass media to execute their public relations assignments. The media on the other hand, turn to public relations practitioners for information needs of their audience."

To further buttress the marriage between public relations and media relations, Sriramesh and Vercic (2003) as cited by Didiugwu, (2011, p.42) maintain that there is a symbiotic relationship or call it synergy between the two, stating:

> There is near unanimity among authors of public relations literature that the media and public relations have a symbiotic, sometimes contentious relationship. Most public relations practitioners would agree that media relations account for a significant portion of their public relations effort, because they wish to use the media for publicity purposes. However, public relations professionals also serve the media by providing them with information subsidies.

On his on part, Sambe (2005, p.243) vividly expresses the relationship existing between public relations and media as he says, "public relations at its best has a unique relationship with the mass media. The communicative function of public relations practice has become an inextricable part of the mass communications network."

However, there are still some skirmishes as to the relationship that exists between public relations practitioners and journalists. According to Dustin, (2008, p.20), "the area where research has examined the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists focuses on relationship itself". Delorme and Fedler (2003) establish a feudal relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners saying:

> the hostility between journalists and public relations practitioners began at the end of

> World War I ...journalists feared that publicists' effort to obtain free publicity would reduce newspapers advertising revenue. Thus, history has today turned into more tradition than anything else. But whether the adversarial relationship is in fact only tradition or whether it is actually a relationship that has been irrevocably marred because historical modern-day happenings are uncertain.

It is instructive, therefore, to note that there is an adversarial relationship between the two— PR and media. Thus, Cameron, Sallot and Curtin (1997) aver that "Media personnel are reluctant to use public relations information subsidies because of this adversarial relationship."

Dustin (2008) reiterate that the relationship between the two has some issues to handle, which has eaten deep into the root and foundation of their relationship. He cites a study carried out in 1961 by Feldman which he sums up this way: "It found discrepancies between the two groups on dimensions such as creditability, occupational status and professionalism."Above all, the relationship that exists between journalists and public relations practitioners if put in a balance could just be described at some point as cordial and at another point not cordial. This is attributable to issues bordering on transparency, creditability and mutual respect. This is not strange. What is, however, strange is that governing bodies such as Nigeria Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) and Nigerian Union of Journalist (NUJ) have left the strained relationship to rankle. However, they need to sit up to their responsibilities to serve as mediators for both professions in other to promote a positive relationship.

Media Relations Programmes (Tools and Strategies)

Just as public relations practice is guarded by the tools and strategies to function effectively, the same is known for media relations. Thus, to perform effectively, the media personnel must, by way of priority consider some tools which may include:

- **Communication**: for efficient performance, the journalist must be able to communicate to the understanding of both the PR office and the audience. Hence Nwosu (2005, p.10) exemplifies what communication can help to achieve, viz:"Information and communication which cement relationship and reduce frictions must therefore be properly understood and properly managed for improved results in today's competitive world."

Secondly, when there is no communication and goals are blurred, the governed under this condition cannot be mobilized, and when this is so, of course, mass participation can not be achieved (Egbu, 2011).

- **Mutual respect**: this must be accorded to the PR person to always remain your resource — ability to reach you when there is need for you, which is why Rodman (2005, p.385) says:"Public relations practitioners do all they can to act as resource for the reporters. Thus, they can only act as resource when there exist mutual respect; else, they turn to others."
- **Contact**: you have to be in touch all the time. When there is an existing regard for the source, you will be contacted when the need arises. Hence, Rodman (2005, p.385) calls it "... the practice of developing and maintaining contact"... and, Boyd (2000, p.30) supports the assertion as he says: "the relationship between reporters and their contact is doubled-edged. The news writer needs a story, the news maker needs publicity". Thus, contact is a veritable tool for enhanced performance.
- **Cordiality**: Nwosu, (2005, p.10), explained this when he talked about relationship with others, as he puts it, "... relationship with his colleagues, subordinates, stakeholders, publics or customers."
- **Delivery**: The media person must at all times prove his mettle. That is to say that at any given responsibility, bestowed on him; he has to deliver. It is only by regularly doing this that he can be put into confidence and be trusted with

more assignments.

- **Creditability** — It was Dustin (2008, p.22) who revealed that a study in 1961as carried out by Feldman "found discrepancies between the two groups on dimensions such as creditability, occupational status and professionalism." What this implies, unarguably, is that creditability is the fulcrum on which media/ public relationship is hinged, indicating that the media man, even though for the PR man, should be very credible to remain afloat. No wonder, Sommers (2009, p.9) says that the reason for setting media relations programme is "to raise awareness and creditability for a company or organization and its products and services."
- **Consistency** - Double standards is not allowed for relationship to thrive.

To adequately achieve success in the field of media relations, these tools must be guarded jealously, if the reasons for advancing media relations programmes must be achieved.

Therefore, what are the reasons for setting up media relations programmes? According to Sommers, (2009, p.9) the reasons for media relations programmes include:

- To enhance a company or organization's sales and profits, attracts financial support, and raise funds.
- To educate the public on how to choose, buy or use products and services, motivating them to take action.
- To raise awareness and creditability for a company or organization and its products and services.
- To help a company and its spokesperson become an acknowledged expert in its industry —to be one the media call when they want to quote.
- To test-market a new idea, launch a new product or services, or diversify a business.
- To build a new image.
- To generate goodwill, prestige, trust, and approval from key markets, which will then attract new employees, clients, members, donors, shareholders, sponsors and volunteers.
- To overcome resistance or counteract misconceptions.
- To help insulate an organization or company during crisis to support other aspects of a company's marketing programmme such as advertising and sales promotion.

Applications of Media Relations

In applying the dictates of media relations, the media person must, as a matter of concern, exhibit maturity in handling issues. It means that he has to address reports objectively rather than be enmeshed in 'subjectivity'. The essence of this is simply to avoid the adversarial situation, where there will be loggerhead between the media and the public relations practitioners due to inability of one party to shift grounds. However, the adversary can also be greatly canvassed by the public relations person. Jefikins (1998. p.81) writes that "The PR practitioner has to reconcile him or herself to their contradictions and anomalies; this is not being cynical, merely practical. It is known as adversarial situation." But the media relations practitioner by training should watch it coming and always nip it in the bud.

Similarly, in applying good media (press) relations, Jefkins (1998, p.80) established some very important principles of achieving application of the necessary tenets, as a means of achieving good press relations. According to Jefkins, they include:

- By serving the media
- By establishing a reputation for reliability
- By supplying good copy
- By cooperation in providing materials
- By providing verification facilities.
- By building personal relationship with the media.

Granted, these outlined responsibilities are for the public relations practitioner to execute, but the media person also needs to do his bit as it should be regarded as a two way thing viz:

- By serving the company. The media relations

person should service the company.

- Establish and maintain reputation- this is multi-directional. It is not for the public relations practitioners alone. Everyone has to build reputation to instill confidence.
- Providing the required material and results needed — it is expected that when the PR office hands material to the media person, he should deliver.
- In terms of verification, the media person should be transparent enough to allow for the PRs office to examine what it has done. To do thus, you inform them of the time for the wiring of paid information.

Of course, building personnel relationship is not for the public relations practitioner alone; the media person should also queue in for better harmonious relationship. Regrettably, though, the litany of responsibilities is almost always treated with levity, thereby undermining the supposed responsibilities. It is in attempt to put issues straight with media relations operatives' vis-à-vis public relations practitioners that they have the situation known as adversarial. If there had not been any of such issues, the term depicting conflict with the various practitioners would not have arisen abinitio.

Challenges

There is hardly any profession, no matter how successful it has been adjudged, that has got no form of challenge or the other. Therefore, the media relations is and cannot be any exception. To this end, there are various challenges staring practitioners in the face, which also affect the public relations practitioners in particular and society in general. Some of the identified challenges facing media relations practice include:

- **Lack of trust**: The media relations practitioners do not trust the journalists for any reason. They see them as coming to divulge information that will expose them to ridicule, thereby refusing to empower them with the information they need. It is for this reason that Abidde (2009, p.18) wrote, "Collectively, Nigeria journalists have their short comings and weaknesses; individually too, there are bad eggs". It is for these that you have mistrusts.
- **Lack of incentive/motivation:** The journalists in dealing with public relations personnel lack incentive necessary to boost their productivity in performing their responsibility. This in-turn kills motivation to thrive and deliver. Delivery is what keeps them afloat, as it will end up building confidence.
- **Low courage:** Some practitioners are not courageous in dealing with issues about journalism, especially as they affect relations with public relations practitioners. Therefore, Abidde (2009, p.1 8) says, "Society needs men and women of courage; it needs men and women of substance to speak the truth and be the nation's conscience. Society needs such men and women to direct...."
- **Lack of enabling laws:** There are no laws backing media practice or public relations for which parties will look at and practice. However, sometimes, there are, but the cog of enforcement exists, hence allowing them to wonder like "sheep without shepherds".It also brings to fore issue of professionalism. Journalism as a profession is not regulated — giving room to anyone to practice — 'free entry and free exit', thereby encouraging charlatans and interlopers. Of course, the resultant effect of that cannot be over stressed. Imagine that a fake medical doctor carries out a surgery on a patient. The end result can be anticipated; hence you have a regulatory body for medical Doctors. Thus, if such regulatory body exists for journalists, it will help a great deal.
- **Lack of Ethics:** To Okunna, (1995, p.1), ethnics means character and morals, which teaches us about right or wrong behaviour. With this in mind, it is evident that professionals should have character, but the question is this: do our journalists have deep sense of character? The swift response is largely no. It is no because there are some ethnical problems in the course of performing their

functions. For example, Okunna (1995, pp.81-82) established the case of prevalent ethnical problems amounting to bribery and corruption.

Conclusion

Media relations is preoccupied with creating relationships with the public relations units. The main thrust of this relationship is to create synergy for a better working relationship, which in the long run is to communicate to the public on issues they should know. Therefore, for the audiences to know, they have to rely on the media for information. And to achieve this, information required must come from the units charged with relating and giving out information to the media.

In doing all of these, the media relations experts - the journalists -face lots of challenges. However, the challenges are surmountable if remedies and clues to them are adhered to — as there is hardly any situation - no matter how bad - that has no solution. It is this solution or remedies, if followed, that will enhance productivity and avail the citizenry and audience the right to know when they should.

Remedies / Recommendations

Journalists must practice, putting into consideration the ethnics and laws guiding the profession.

- They should avoid lies.
- They should see objectivity as a watch word and a sine-qua-non for practicing their trade.
- In course of practice, they must always exhibit fairness in all their dealings — reportage and interviews, as the case may be.
- They must avoid character assassinations; perhaps, if they are not getting their fair share, as expected, they resort to assassinating characters. They should avoid it.
- They should avoid taking bribes, Kick back, etc. in the name of 'brown envelopes'.It is image damaging for the person and the profession.
- Unions should tighten their noose to exterminate charlatans and quacks.
- Similarly, regulatory bodies should roll out road maps for media practice to stem the tide of unprofessional conduct.
- There should be regular sensitization, seminars, symposia for professionals to keep them in tune with the present realities in the professional and world best practice, especially highlighting on the journalistic code.

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