

Role of Public Relations Practitioners in the Management of Federal Government Agencies in Nigeria (A Study of Southeast)

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Abstract

The focus of this study was to examine the role of public relations practitioners in the management of Nigeria Federal Agencies with particular reference to South-East. Major aim was to ascertain whether federal agencies have functional, and qualified public relations staff that contribute positively in the management of such agencies businesses. To achieve the desired aim of the study, the researchers opted for survey research method in order to drive the study. Study area was from South-East where population and sample size of 1,500 respondents were raised. Investigation showed that with over sixty federal agencies in Nigeria, effective operations of public relations practitioners are not noticed as chief executives of such agencies sideline PR units in the discharge of the agencies mandate. The study concludes that some Nigerian federal agencies are operating without functional public relations departments or units. Therefore, it recommends the intervention of the NIPR to make government at all levels to recognize the vital roles public relations plays in governance and fully incorporate qualified public relations staff in government business especially federal agencies in south-east.

Keywords: *Public Relations Practitioners, Management, Federal Agencies, Nigerian Government.*

Introduction

The role of public relations in government cannot be over emphasized. A public relations is an important instrument for the achievement of government or individual goals and objectives and also the practice of managing the flow of information between government and its publics. Although public relations is a vital and powerful force in our society, it is unfortunate that some groups of people, organizations and government fail to understand its effect or impact in the developing countries like Nigeria. To some people as marketers, communicators, public information officers, public affairs, corporate public relations are to pass information, answer press and advertisers on communication media. Public relation can mean different things to different people. It can be seen as communicating or relating with the publics. Longman Dictionary defines it as “the relationship between an organization and the general public’s, which must be kept friendly in various ways”. The National Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) defines public relations as the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its publics. It is an inevitable fact that there is a need for a sense of mutual dependence and trust between members of the public and the institutions they serve. In other words, there must be mutual understanding between an institution, organization and its publics and that is public relation.

The evolution of public relations in this century is something two wonderful because it strikes a balance between man and God, and as well serves as a middle man between an organization and the public from my own thought or calculation. In the world today for every government institution, company or organization to make it, there must be a good image, their policies well defined and the publics to understand their objectives. This is what public relation is interested in. In this study, the researchers therefore, looks at the role of public relations practitioners play in managing the image of Nigeria federal agencies in the South East.

The researchers examined the different types of crises that could dent the image of government, examined the effects of such crisis on the image of the Nigeria government and how to use the public relations to achieve stated objectives. In the course of this, the researchers examined some studies where effective public

relations were used to revitalize and manage some government establishments hitherto on the brink of collapse in and outside the country.

We all know what happens to government corporate organizations, institutions or agencies of government when they are faced with crisis. They begin to show sign of depression, because public trust and patronage dwindles. To be able to overcome such fate, government and corporate organizations need to “cut their coat according to their size”. At the end of the day, such government or organization or institution will have to seriously consider restricting and when you restructure certain fundamentals and though painful changes have to be made which, if not effected cautiously can easily affect the organizations image.

Needless to say when this happens, survival becomes difficult, if not possible. This is where public relations take over. For any meaningful and workable restructuring and management to be put in place in any government organization or institutions that relies on public confidence for its survival, the input of public relations cannot be ignored; any government institution that finds itself in this situation and decides to ignore public relations certainly does so at its own peril. For its action can easily send the wrong signal to its public or community.

Fundamentally, public relations is expected to be adequately involved in such an exercise that makes the survival of the government or institution or organization its main objectives. When public relations is involved a lot of unnecessary representation can be avoided because it will ensure that the social aspects of whatever changes are made to salvage the situation are well taken care of.

Dangogo (1998) cited in Okoye and Joe (2024. p.47) believes that public relations are effective management tool of communication between the government and its publics. To him the public relations practitioner employs effective communication to build, sustain and defend his organization’s reputation among both its internal and external publics.

He has the responsibility to recommend new communication strategies towards improving organizational efficiency. Improving efficiency remains the key to successful public relations practice in any organization environment. Public relations projects the management personality of which the public relations department to represents through their activities with the use of their perspective tool i.e. (print and electronic media). The aim is to create favorable atmosphere between an organization and its publics. Udejaja and Sam (2024. p.98) asserts that a public relations involves anything that is focused, improving and enhancing the flow of communication between government, institution and its publics.

The objectives of any public relations is to build confidence, good will and trust between an organization and its publics, to generate goodwill among the target groups who are essentially for a general progress and profitability of the institution or government. They also help the management to evaluate and interpret opinions, altitudes and external activities of the government.

Some of the federal agencies in South East include: Akanu Ibiam International Airport, Enugu, Enugu Development Institute (PRODA), Enugu, Scientific Equipment Development Institute Enugu (SEDI), National Root Corps Research Institute, Umudike, Federal Inland Revenue Service, Onitsha and others with their regional offices in South East. All of these agencies need the effective operations of public relations practitioners in order to let the world know about their existence, operations, contributions towards national development and effective laundering government image before the public.

Statement of Research Problem

Communication plays an important role in all aspects of human endeavors, thus without effective communication within an agency its policies and decisions made may not be properly understood by those who the decisions are made for and this may eventually lead to the fall of the agency reputation and image

and in fact, the government. The researchers' statement of the problem involves the role of public relations in federal government and how an agency like AIIA, SEDI and PRODA is managing its reputation and relating with its numerous publics without a functional public relations unit that is prepared and trained to handle public relations in an institution.

It is in the light of the above that informed this study aimed at looking at public relations unit in AIIA, SEDI and PRODA, its role, importance, functions, achievements, so far and failures in managing the image of the agency.

Objectives of the Study

The major aim of this study is to assess the role and duties of public relations office in the management of the federal agencies in Nigeria with particular to the Akanu Ibiam International Airport (AIIA), Scientific Equipment Development Institute (SEDI) Enugu and Product Development Institute (PRODA).

1. To examine the role and contributions of public relations unit in managing the image of federal agencies and parastatals in South East, Nigeria.
2. To study the tools and techniques public relations unit adopt in bridging communication gap between agencies and its entire publics.
3. To study the challenges facing public relations unit of AIIA, SEDI and PRODA, and how they manage and prevent crises.
4. To assess the effectiveness and relevance of public relations towards image management in agencies.

Research Questions

1. What are the roles and contributions of public relations unit in managing the image of federal agencies in Nigeria?
2. What tools and techniques do the public relations units of AIIA, SEDI and PRODA, adopts in bridging communication gap between the agencies management and its entire publics?
3. What are the challenges facing the public relations departments of federal agencies and how do they manage and prevent crisis?
4. To what extent does the management of AIIA, SEDI and PRODA recognize the relevance and effectiveness of public relations unit towards image management?

Literature Review

Revolution of Modern Public Relations

Modern public relations practices evolved through three states, press agency, information and understanding press agents were employed by showmen to create situations designed to get the names and pictures of the performers published in newspapers. Press agency was born when Phineas T. Barnum started show business 1835. He employed press agents who publicized his business in newspapers and magazines. They had their motto "Let the people be fooled", Asemah (2018, p.102).

However in the early 1930s there were mounting pressures on businessmen to recognize the need to inform the public about business operations. Eminent scholars derided business people for being ruthless and for exploiting labor. They insisted that the public should be given facts about the business. This led to the changing of the motto from "Let the people be fooled" to "Let the people be informed" this can be described as the beginning of the era of responsible public relations. A leading figure in this vanguard was Ivy Lee. He insisted that corporations should give the public accurate information about their policies and practices. Ivy Lee has been called the father of modern public relations. He was the first to set up a public relations consultancy.

According to Dunu, Okafor and Ekwealor (2024. p. 48), the third phase of the evolution of modern public relations came with Edward Barney. Public relation practitioners in the 1920s recognized that public relations attitudes towards business. It further recognizes that positive steps should be taken to achieve public goodwill.

Edward Barney was one of the first public relation counselors during the economic depression in the 1920s much of the understanding and goodwill towards business development by the early public relations counselors turned into distrust and suspicious on business and the free enterprise system, corporate managers recognized the need to rebuild public confidence and regain the goodwill of the public lost during the depression by establishing public relations department and employing public relations managers to improve the public images of business. One of these early managers was Paul Garnet who in 1937 was employed by the General motors' corporation to manage a one man public relations department.

The United African Company (UAC) was among the forerunners of organized public relations practices in Nigeria. It set up its public relations department in 1949 with the aim of informing business and commerce about business activities as well as projecting UAC as a major Nigeria industrial, technical and commercial company involved in the stability of the economic life and progress of Nigeria.

Crises Management Function of Public Relations

Crises management according to Nwosu, (1996. p.89) is about “seizing the initiative, taking control of what has happened, before it engulfs the institution of company” the key in crises management is communication crises. Communication is an important medium for accomplishing crises management. It must be effected in a calm and organized manner, it must be timely enough to quell emotions before they get out of hand, it must also meet deadlines of the press that certainly will carry the story with or without the company's viewpoint.

A public relations is a veritable tool a company uses in crises management. The role of public relations is help make policies and operational decision that positively reflect the interest of the stakeholders in an organization and to help the organization understand the elements of the environment which it operates. A public relations practitioner is to communicate to the publics about their affairs and eliminate sources and areas of misunderstanding. Everything directed towards improved practices and communication between people and institutions.

With the growth and extension of communication media, public opinion becomes more powerful. The publics could read and be reached with information. Thus the specific function of management emerged, aimed at recognizing the importance of humanizing business and bringing its public relations to the management. Thus, PR practice then became management philosophy, aimed at doing everything calculated to improve mutual understanding between an organization and all its publics. It's aimed at the public's of an organization on behalf on the institutions.

Management Strategies

No doubt, it must be clearly understood by all, that students are dynamic human beings who must react to their equally dynamic environment. At times when actions and reactions are equal and opposite we have frictions. In dynamic world we are not likely to be able to eradicate such situation, but surely we can always devise ways and means of managing such crisis situations. This is to say that there is no antidote to crisis, what is needed is a good public relations experts to ameliorate this problem of youth exuberance, understanding and pity them.

Apart from showing understanding and pity to the publics, the authorities at both institutional and management level should find ways of carefully involving people in some crucial decisions affecting their

general welfare. One way of achieving this is to give them representation on some of the board and committees where decisions are made.

Another useful strategy for managing agency's crisis is to set up a standing dispute arbitration committee in the federal and state ministries of education, students could be encouraged to take complaints against their college authorities to this committee who would help to look into them.

The existing practice of using coercion and brute force on publics by policemen and soldiers in curbing agency's crisis is rather crude, barbaric and ineffective. We must learn to embrace dialogue in all facets of our national life. Our law enforcement agents must be trained and retrained in the acts of mob dispersal without the use of deadly weapon of war. Some civilized societies have perfected the use of hot water and batons in dispersing crowds.

These strategies as emphasized above are regulatory and repressive in nature and will go a long way in managing and limiting student's crisis while enhancing the institutions image.

Public Relations Tools and Techniques

A plethora of tools exist or could be invented to translate public relations ideas into reality, to get messages across to defined publics. Some or all of these resources could be mustered and put at the services of a public relations effort or campaign. In selecting tool(s) appropriateness should be the primary considerations. In bringing about understanding tools to get the publics familiarized since "Familiarity breeds favorability" the following are few these tools:

- **Press release:** Information that is communicated as a part of the regular TV/radio programs, newspapers, magazines and other types of mainstream media archives a much bigger impact than advertisements. This is due to the fact that most people consider such information more trustworthy and meaningful than paid adverts. Press releases are therefore one of the oldest and most effective PR tools.
- **News Letters:** Sending newsletters relevant information about the organization and its products/services, directly to the target audience is also a common method to create and maintain a strong relationship with the public.
- **News Conference:** It is an organized occasion not only for breaking some news to invite newsmen but also for giving them the chance to ask pertinent questions. It involves direct, face to face communication. Journalist and media representatives generally attend corporate events and meeting when called upon to do by an organization.
- **The Institutions Publication:** An institutions house publication is a vehicle for communication messages from an organization to its publics. The publication maybe for internal, external or internal-external publics from the institutions point of view, the publication acts as an interpreter of policies, a creator and booster of morale, loyalty and discipline and an informer educator. News of promotions, prizes, magazines births and dismissals etc. creates and boost morale, loyalty and discipline as the case may be. Other news item informs on the history, operations and prospect of the institution and aids its inter-relationship with wider society audience.

People brought in under such emergency conditions whether as staff or outside counsel might subsequently be hired or retained on a continuing basis. Then, beyond the emergency or crisis situation, the place and the role of public relations are determined and re-determined to fit changing needs, problems, opportunities and values standards so perceived and set by a succession of senior officials. The result of this is that the practitioner is sometimes assigned many odd jobs, which ordinarily should not be performed by a public relations man.

To this effect, public relations is the management functions that enables the institution to achieve effective relationship with their various publics through an understanding of audience opinion, attitudes and values, hence public relations attempt to create positive opinion.

According to Duyile, (2011. p.185-7) researching, conducting and evaluating, on a continuing basis, programs of actions and communications to achieve informed public understanding necessary to the success of an organization aims. This description of public relations is not only communication tool also irrigating management functions of planning researching and decision making. However, public relations achieve this effective relations with organization publics in a variety of how it is implemented as a management functions, integrated into; research planning, controlling and coordinating.

The public relations man create a conducive room or atmosphere that staff, students and external publics would enjoy and be proud to be associated with such an institution. Offonry (2001) state that “in addition to good conditions of service and effective communication. Well informed publics is less valuable to bustle propaganda than those who are informed. When an institution publics are dissatisfied with day to day running of an institution, it leads to industrial strike, sabotage. Absenteeism, late-coming, spoilage, poor amenities from

Public Relations and Image

Image is a controversial term in public relations, John (2012. p.12) stated that he never uses the term image, because “I did not know what the term really means” image is an umbrella phrase related to corporate communication that implies that public relations deals with “unreality” image suggest that public relations practitioners manipulate, polish, project, tarnish, dent, bolster or boost something that is not real.

However, because image combines the symbolic perception and attitudes formed about an organization by publics and the institutions behavioural relationship (interaction between organizations and their publics) it remains a subject of inquiry, image may affect reputation in a positive or negative fashion.

Image depends on organizational activities, how management and publics interact, how is the organization doing financially, how leaders behave and the organization day to day operations, image also results from all the messages sent by an organization, both intentionally and unintentionally, well as social, historical and lived experiences. These elements comprises the total impression that the entity makes on a public perception of an organization, it could be said then that image consist of all the conclusion different publics make about an enterprises after being exposed to public relations effort (Morah and Udeze, 2024. p. 95) efforts to enhance, image should reflect the organization’s mission, culture, values and personality to work well and cultivate a positive image, is a proactive way of preparing for bad times, Maldonado, (2020, p.102).

Theoretical Framework

Agenda setting theory is public relations theory that examines the relationship between the media and the public opinion. It was developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald in 1971. The theory posits a relationship between the way the media rank the importance of various issues published in them and degree of salience these issues have for the society (Ogbuoshi, p.211; 2022). Scholars have weighed on the role of media in shaping public opinion in the society, and seriously agree that agenda setting theory is the most ideal, because it refers to how the media’s news coverage determines which issues become the focus of public attention.

This theory rests on two assumptions: One, media filter and shape what we see rather than just reflecting stories to the audience. Again, it assumes that the more likely the public will consider that issue as important. The only theory that spell out the characteristics of public relations, media and audience is agenda setting theory. So, it is most suited for this study.

Research Methodology

Research Design is the researcher's plan of action concerning the study, compressed into few paragraphs (Obasi, 2013). It is also seen as the plan or blueprint which specifies how data relating to a given problem should be collected and analyzed or the procedural outline for the conduct of a given investigation (Nworgu, 2000), cited in Ogbuoshi, 2020.

A research design presents a data plan of how a particular study should be conducted, that is, the type of study determines the nature of the methodology. Research designs are procedural framework within which the research is conducted. In simpler terms, research design is a plan for research work that aims at providing guidelines which the research work being conducted should follow.

The researcher employed the survey research method for the study. This is because it offers the respondents security base on the fact that their identities like names, ranks, offices are not required. Survey also gives the researcher the opportunity to elicit valid response unlike content analysis where the researcher may be inadvertently biased. Also, the survey research method was employed because the people's opinions were sought through questionnaire.

Population of the Study

According to Obasi (2013), "Population of study is the target of the study, which could be made up of living or non-living things" population is generally taken to be the totality of all element or subject or number which passes common and specific characteristics within a geographical location. It is also the accurate of all cases that conform to some designated set specifications. The population for this study comprises the member staff of federal agencies in south east Nigeria which according to the information received from the personnel unit of AIIA, was over two thousand eight hundred.

Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

Sample is a section or part of an entire population of people or things which are studied to obtain information about the research variables it implies a proportion which was taken as a representative of the whole population and which conclusions are made on them based on the data which they give and was taken to be peculiar to all members of the whole of the population. Sample size used for this study was 1,500. This was purposively selected using the purposive sampling technique.

The researchers decided to use purposive sampling technique because of the specialized nature of the population of the study. Also, this technique has been adjudged to be accurate and less time consuming.

Discussion of findings

From the responses of one thousand and five hundred respondents across the segment in south east Nigeria, revealed that needed impact discussion and analysis. Discovery showed that less than fifty percent of the respondents did not know that federal government agencies exist in the region. To this group of respondent they never heard or read any news about the agencies on media. According to them, they were not aware of any activities of any federal agencies around them in the south east Nigeria.

Another group affirmed that they were aware that federal agencies, like Airport in Enugu, PRODA, SEDI, all in Enugu, federal medical Centre in Ebonyi, Agricultural research institute, Umudike in Abia, and such other similar agencies located in the zone. But baffles them was that people do not feel the impact of the agencies, because they were never reported in the media. According to the group, whatever achievement or pitfall of such agencies were not known to the people.

Discussing the specifics according to research questions, diverse opinions were collected in form of idea, data or information, on whether the role of public relations in managing the agencies were visible

respondents doubted that and rather opined that public relation practitioner role were at the lowest ebb, as the public never see the impact of the professionals in the agencies. Majority of the respondents, over seventy percent of them felt bad that public relations practitioners in those agencies were not provided with necessary tools to enable them perform optimally. As a result of that lack, they could not develop any technique as to enable them bridge any communication gap between the agencies and their publics.

As a result of neglect, the skeletal or non-existing public relations units in some agencies face challenges in their operations, and as such could not contribute effectively in managing crisis as they arose in the host communities. For example, crisis arose when Enugu Airport was to be upgraded to international status. People's property at Emene were destroyed. Instead of using PR means to manage the crisis, they authorities used federal might to suppress people.

Conclusion

It was shocking to discover that over a hundred and plus federal agencies and parastatals, over fifty percent of chief executives in those agencies or parastatals, in whatever nomenclature they bear, either jettison public relations officer and therefore, combine that role with his mandatory and statutory roles. Such evidence-based lacuna in the management of Nigerian Federal agencies spelt doom in government image handling. People do not hear anything about the government, its ministries through agencies under them. Even if the people are informed, such information and messages fall short of normal treatment as those who dish them out are not trained in the art of information management.

Therefore, the study concludes that Chief executives in most federal agencies, including parastatals, have no regard for public relations role in their offices, and so do not have PR departments or units or simply see no reason to enable the departments operate maximally.

Recommendations

Recommendations in the study were based on the objectives raised. Such an approach is for better understanding of the efforts of the study as put forward by the researchers. The recommendations are:

1. As rightly observed during field study, federal government agencies in the South-East, do not recognize the usefulness of public relations practitioners, therefore, the study recommends in-house training and re-orientation of the agencies chief executives to understand why they should have variable and functional PR units and department.
2. The study recommends proper establishment of public relations units or departments in our federal agencies, to be accompanied with adequate funding that can enable practitioners procure modern-technology-driven tools for more PR operations.
3. On the challenges faced by public relations units in AIIA, SEDI and PRODA, which are manmade, the study recommends change of attitude on the parts of the management so as to recognize the importance of this component in the agency information management.
4. The vital role of public relations practitioners in every organization, government or individuals is never in doubt, therefore, no government corporate organization or individuals in positions of authorities can toy with this life saving role for the betterment of growth and development in such government or organization or an individual. So, the study strongly recommends that every government agencies, parastatals or MDGs, in fact, offices of government should recognize the relevance of public relations towards image management because any government component that has poor image-outfit before the public is doomed and can affect the government at large.

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