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Public Relations and Information Management in Organizations in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The study discusses on public relations and information management in an organizations in Nigeria. This reviews the importance of information management in public relations units. Selection of the right and type of information we share with others not to cause harm to ourselves and to our organizations is very important. It is a conscious gathering, selection and dissemination of only information that are capable of affecting opinions and attitudes about an organization positively. The study reviewed the following concepts: Public relations and information management, the credibility factor of the information, information management goals, information management during a crisis, roles of public relations in an organization, functions of public relations in an organization effect of competition and threat. Based on this review, the study concluded that information management is important to human existence and an organization. It is also laudable goals and availability of efficiently running internal communication system. However, the study made the following recommendations: Organizations should always employ honourable people in the public relations units that will have public esteem, the public relations units should always feed the public with credible information with public expectations, public relations units should be effective in communication to facilitate exchange of ideas, knowledge and information in order to reach a decision within a reasonable time.

Key Words: Public relations, information management, organizations, Nigeria

Introduction

The idea and practice of information management is a very important phenomenon in human existence. It was practiced by the ancients, it is practiced today; it will be practiced by future generations. Its importance to human existence and certainty of future practice can be seen in the Bible. James Chapter 1:26 in his divine admonition to Christians says that "If anyone thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, his religion is vain". He goes on in Chapter 3 to liken the tongue to a small fire, and says just as small fire can set a great forest ablaze, the tongue, though a small member of our body boasts of great things and can set on fire the cycle of nature. The tongue, according to James, is "a restless evil, full of deadly poison".

It is obvious that James' reference to the power of the tongue here is a reference to the power of communication, how the type of information we disseminate can cause great harm. And, his reference to the need to bridle the tongue is a reference to information management or control.

Public Relations and Information Management

In the light of this, information management may be defined as a calculated selection of the type of information we share with others in order not to cause harm to ourselves, our organization or our community. It is the conscious gathering, selection and dissemination of only Information which are capable of affecting opinions and attitudes about an organization positively, knowing that information can build up and can destroy.

Information is needed for the day to day running of the organization. It includes the how to do it and when, type of data. If it is not supplied when it is needed, a process-production, administration, decision taking, etc. is halted. These types of data may be regarded as operational information and should be harnessed for the functioning of the organization.

Organization also needs tactical information. These are data which can enhance productive relations and linkages with those capable of contributing positively to the goal of the organization. Besides, an organization requires a step-by-step data which can ensure the attainment of its goals and objectives. These types of data could be considered as strategic information. They are details of how the objectives and goals would be attained.

So, information management means planned communication. There should be a data bank for information on the major aspects of the organization, and intelligence on matters relating to the company, a guideline on when, and what type of information should be released and to whom. This means a projection of how communication should be conducted to enhance the attainment of organization goal.

All along, mention has been made of information but nothing said about what it is. How can one manage what he does not know or have? What is information? According to the Information Commission for the Study of Communication problems (McBride, 1980), information includes “news, data, pictures, facts and messages, opinions, and comments required in order to understand and react knowledgeably to personal, environmental, national, and international conditions as well as to be in a position to take appropriate decisions.” This constitutes a great resource to governments, organizations, and even individuals and, like all resources, information must be managed profitably.

According to Udoakah (2010), information, apart from its ability to help people to understand and react knowledgeably to situation, must be:

1. Timely – late information is as good as dead horse;
2. precise – information does not belong to the realm of speculation or probability;
3. Accurate – inaccurate information is worse than no information;
4. Verifiable – information should be such that one can check for confirmation;
5. Accessible – information should be such that one can have access to;
6. Free from bias – information should not be a product of prejudice or stereotype;
7. Comprehensive – information should be complete because incomplete information leads to wrong conclusions;
8. Appropriate – information should serve the desired purpose;
9. Clear – information should not be ambiguous or open to several interpretations;
10. Worth having – information should be possession utility;
11. Have a form utility – information should have a form in which it is transmitted;
12. Have a place utility – information should have a place where it should be used.

Indeed, information is an important commodity which should be handled responsibly. It is not a gift item. Even if it were, gift items are not given to all and sundry. Information management or control is a universal practice, although the degree and motive may vary. Generally, the procedure to follow seems to centre around asking and answering the following questions:

1. What information should be given out?
2. To whom should the information be given?
3. Why is that information to be given?
4. What should the information be given?
5. How should the information be given?

These are very crucial questions in information management, and failure to ask them and to answer them rightly, before giving out information, can set a community, an organization or a nation on fire. There should be a hierarchy of spokesmen indicating who speaks for the company in which communication situation. In other words, staff should be selected and trained as spokesmen so that there is no room for “No comment” when so and so person is not in the office for whatever reason. In this connection, people should be made to be dispensable rather than indispensable. Communication should be planned, organized, controlled, and directed towards the attainment of organizational goals.

The Credibility Factor of the information

Even the information so selected, no matter how carefully it is done, and passed on to people, does not usually receive automatic acceptance. The receiver of a message evaluates the source and the message before he believes or rejects it. His willingness to believe what the source says, according to Aristotle, depends on the sagacity high character and goodwill of the source. Baxter, (2014) not only said “what you are speaks so loud I cannot hear what you say”, but that “the reason why anyone refuses his assent to your opinion, or his aid to your benevolent design, is in you. He refuses to accept you as a bringer of truth because... you have not given him to authentic sign”.

All these border on public perception of the source, not on what the source thinks about itself Public perception of a source is the picture in the heads of members of the public about the ways a source discharges its functions. A source is understood in this context to refer to an organization or an institution for which a Public Relations Executive is the spokesman.

Although organizations may claim not to owe an obligation to any individual, they exist to provide services of sorts to a collectivity of individuals making up their publics. To succeed in discharging their functions they need the cooperation or goodwill of the people. To have such cooperation or goodwill they just cannot afford to stop taking the people into consideration in their day to day decisions. They must consider how the people’s expectations can best be met. As organizations and institutions evaluate their staff members so do members of the public appraise organizations and institutions. The

public may perceive them as trust-worthy, competent, and forceful or active in discharging their functions, or, it may write them off as incompetent. This public perception of organizations or institutions is an indicator of their creditability or lack of it.

Credibility is based on the fulfillment of public expectation and the validation of past trust relationships, to use Gurevitch and Blumler's (2017) words. It is based on the manner which organizations or institutions had been presenting information in the past. As Brembeck and Howell (2016) note, it has been postulated ever since historical treatises of the ancient Greeks that "The more credible the source of a message, the greater the likelihood that the message will be received". also, Baxte (2015) wrote that the man who wishes to persuade people would not be negligent as to the matter of character, but would rather apply himself to establish a most honourable name among his fellow citizens, for words carry greater conviction when spoken by men of good repute than when spoken by men of good repute than when spoken by men who live is of more weight than that which is furnished by words. Therefore, the stronger a man's desire to persuade his hearer, the more zealously he would strive to be honourable and to have the esteem of his fellow citizens.

Every organization or institution has a particular impression it makes on the member of the public. This impression may be positive or negative, they would always affect the way one receives information from it. Naturally, one tends to believe a source that has created a positive impression in the minds of people. However, a public impression of an organizing is not static but changes from time to time because of one bad or good act or another which the organization may do. Therefore, naturally, organizations realizing their rating by the public, are always striving to change or retain such rating.

Information Management Goals

Information management or control is a universal practice, although the degree and motive may vary. But the way it has been associated with the media industry in regard to news production tends to give it a negative meaning. Usually, it is discussed under the gate-keeping theory and seen as a practice whereby media managers take active and conscious role in selecting messages, filtering them and amplifying them for the audience (Cassata and Asante, 2019).

Interestingly, Schramm (2013), has shown that information control or management is not peculiar to the media industry, and has extended the definition to include the decision of the librarian on what books to purchase, the teacher, on what textbooks or teaching films it to use, the briefing officer on what to tell his superior, and even the husband at the dinner table, on what to tell his wife about the day's events at the office. Also, it can be added that the decisions of the public relations executive on what to tell his publics. Even with this Schamm's illustration would still not be exhaustive.

Although information management or control is practiced universally, it would be difficult to give universal goals upon which it is founded. But generally, information management from a public relations point of view aims to:

- a. Protect the reputation and image of an organization;
- b. Minimize controversy and attendant disruption which uncontrolled information might generate;
- c. Promote the aims and interests of the organization;
- d. Avoid routine refutations in the press;
- e. Present the organization as organized by adopting a consistent pattern of giving information to the public.

Information Management during a Crisis

Apparently, information management is a daily practice in many organizations. But crisis always compels the public to view it with new organizations. But crisis always compels the public to view it with new eyes. The immediate object of this transformed vision is the public's right to know. Therefore, public relations information management should be seen as integral to crisis management. It entails availability of organizational structures equipped with effective communication to facilitate exchange of ideas, knowledge and pieces of useful information in order to reach a decision within a reasonable time, on what to tell the public. According to Johnson and Johnson (2012), "In order to organize itself to accomplish its goals, maintain itself in good working order, and adapt to a changing world, a group must structure its communication". Unfortunately, communication structure in many organizations tends to work against information flow rather than facilitate it. The result is that public relations executives cannot get at the public promptly in time of crisis because they cannot contact their chief executives or some other key staff for any necessary clarifications.

Perhaps, this situation may not be a problem for an organization that traditionally, has not been known to be quick at making public statements at times of crisis. But it is certainly a problem for an organization that has been known for such a tradition, for a consistent pattern of giving information to the public may tell people that an organization is organized. It seems logical that a solution to this type of communication problem lies in the public relations executives getting a communication network that would enable them to cope with the press, installed in their organizations. Being able to cope with the press will ensure that the general tenor of the press accounts on the issue at hand would contribute toward a favourable public image, whereas giving a 'no comment' response to the press or telling the press "I'm not competent to speak on the issue" could encourage speculative and hostile publications from the media.

Some organizations, however, try to get at the public promptly even at the risk of giving back to the press to deny what it said or confirm what it denied. This means that the whole truth may not be told, and conflicting official versions of the situation may emerge worse still, the mistakes might not even get corrected. These omissions and or commissions may work against organization's interest.

Apart from in-house problems which beset information management by different organizations, the problem in a democracy, Cockrell (2012) notes, tends to centre around public desire to know and the paramount need for corporate security and reputation. The public relations code of ethics even compounds the problem. By this document, the public relations practitioner undertakes to respect, in the course of his professional duties, the moral principles and rules of the Universal Declaration of Human Right". Moreover, according to Modoux (2011), by definitions, the public relations practitioner is deeply devoted to the fundamental freedom of information, expression, thought, belief and assembly without which he would be unable to do his work". So, should the public be given all the information it wants to know when it wants them? Should sight be lost of danger to organizations or human lives, of mishandled information? These are important questions. Two more questions seem appropriate in order to address the situation properly. They are: what is at stake in the situation that demands the use of information management to tackle? It is lives, certain persons' position or organization', reputation?

Naturally, it seems, if it is the corporate interest, or lives that are at stake, the organization will be left with no option than to decide which information the public should be given and when it should be given. But the public's right to know should not be compromised when personal interests if individuals are concerned. That is, the public relations executive should not attempt to cover-up criminal acts committed by individuals in their organizations. It would amount to a native information management and would portray the organization in an unflattering light.

This suggests, setting up an information committee to work round the clock, during an emergency. It must have accessible telephone lines to the press and community leaders. And, all information from the scene of the crisis, and about the crisis should go to this committee for evaluation and decision on what to tell the press and community leaders. Naturally, this committee should be made up of people who can be trusted, and with knowledge of information management.

Public Relations Information Flow during Crisis

However, there are situations which an organisation cannot, but withhold information, not necessarily for operational reasons but for public morale. This type of information management may be found in organisations, at state and national levels. Frequently, it has been echoed that public accountability requires that when incidents like that occur, there should be a timely explanation and information about steps taken to remedy it. According to Offonry (2015), organisations faced with such problems should talk only when facts are ascertained, and through an authorised spokesman. Also, they should brief appropriate publics as soon as possible.

Since it is impossible to stop the public from hearing about incidents of this nature when they occur, it is advisable to get in touch with the media within twenty-four hours and report the occurrence, and promise detail in the next few hours. This makes for time to make appropriate contacts and confirm the details to be released. Whatever the situation, information should be provided to avoid conflicting rumours. And such information must correspond to the realities of the situation at hand. An organisation should not be doing one thing while the public relations executive tells the public something else. If words are incongruous with deeds, the credibility of the organisation is sure to be adversely affected (Lerbinger, 2012).

According to Western Union (2014), organizations should be accessible to the media so that they do not go to other sources secondly, they should disseminate information from one central point, and avoid "no comments" as this could lead to speculation.

Roles of Public Relations in an Organization

Public relations professionals shape an organization's image. They build the brand, spread the organization's message and minimize the effect of negative publicity. At a small company, the PR person may have to handle all the roles cheerleader, media contact person, the deflector of criticism. Public relations professionals shape an organization's image. They build the brand, spread the organization's message and minimize the effect of negative publicity. At a small company, the PR person may have to handle all the roles cheerleader, media contact person, the deflector of criticism themselves. At larger companies or big PR firms, staffers can have more specialized roles to handle different organizational needs.

Manager or Technician: One way to divide up roles is between communication technicians and communication managers. Communication technicians are PR writers. They turn out press releases, newsletters, website content, speeches, blogs and social media posts. Managers handle the bigger picture, assessing the PR goals to accomplish or the problems to solve and determining the PR strategy required.

Different Organizational Missions

Another way to segment public relations is looking at what different roles accomplish for the organization:

- 1 **Crisis management** deals with emergencies affecting the organization. They help establish policies for dealing with emergencies, such as who gets to communicate with the media, and how management shares information with employees.
- 2 **Relationship management** establishes strategies for building and maintaining relationships with important segments of the public such as customers and reporters.

3 **Image management** professionals work to present the company as socially responsible, compassionate and involved in the community.

4 **Resource management** looks at the budget and resources for the organization's PR and figures out how to make the best use of it.

An organization usually needs its PR team to fill more than one role. Managing relationships and shaping the company's image can generate a lot of goodwill. When a crisis or negative news breaks out, the PR role has to be the minimization of any damage or blowback from the events.

Different Skill Sets: Different PR roles call for different skill sets. PR communication technicians have to be good writers. Their talent lies in writing messages with strong imagery and evocative language that steers listeners to the point the organization wants them to reach. These technicians execute the strategy drawn out by the managers.

Communications managers are more into the big picture. They don't have to be gifted writers themselves, but they set the goals for the people who are. Communications managers have a seat at the management table, discussing strategy, resource management and how to improve the company's image or build relationships given the resources at hand. Sometimes they watch for potential threats to the organization's success, and then craft a PR strategy to head the problem off.

The roles aren't bound by anything but ability and opportunity. A skilled technician may shift from image management to relationship management in different situations. If technicians have the right skills, they may eventually step up and become communications managers.

Functions of Public Relations in an Organization

Every organization that you will ever encounter either has a public relations department or a communications department whether internally or outsourced. Public Relations is often viewed as a critical component of a company's image, branding and even success. If your organization has a strong public relations team your organization is practically guaranteed to have increased sales and brand awareness. Although Public Relation tactics are similar for every organization, the functions and key tasks of a public relations specialist can be varied. Below are just a few of the functions of Public Relations in an organization:

Public Image Strategy: Public relations strategists typically work with top executives in order to craft a visual image of how a company desires to be perceived by the public. This could include focusing in on proper messaging, and then determining the outlines of a campaign in order to disseminate that message.

Outreach Events: Public relations professionals often work with brands to help set up events or even partner with other organizations in order to increase brand awareness. For example: if you own a carpet cleaning company a PR professional may encourage you to connect with a Breast Cancer awareness organization in order to sponsor a Breast Cancer walk event.

Media Relations: One of key function of Public Relations is media relations. PR professionals work with local and national news reporters in order to arrange interviews for press exposure.

Social Media: One relatively new function of public relations is to determine ways that you can maximize an organization's social media presence. This includes but is not limited to Twitter, Facebook and Instagram posting and engagement. It is also a great way for organizations to connect with potential customers and stock holders. An organization's positive use of social media to build its image. Managing a Twitter feed, a Facebook page and a YouTube channel are all vital ways to connect with possible new customers or stakeholders

Handling Emergencies: Sometimes a company or organization is hit with a PR nightmare that threatens to ruin their public image. This is what we refer to as crisis communications. In terms of crisis communications it's always better to plan for the worst before it arrives. Public Relations Department supervises and assesses public attitudes, and maintaining mutual relations and understanding between an organization and its public. It improves channels of communication and to institute new ways of setting up a two-way flow of information and understanding.

1. Media Relations

- Preparing position papers on issues of importance to the organization
- Handling publicity
- Issuing news of activities to external audiences
- Establishing and maintaining contacts with the mass media
- Handling responses to inquiries from the mass media
- Coordinating media conferences and tours
- Tracking and evaluating media coverage\

2. Guest Relations

- Guest reception activities

- Preparing visit agenda and other visit related matters
- Conducting university tours
- Preparing brochures, tour guides, tapes, videos, maps and other guest-related communications materials
- Preparing gift items for the visitors

3. Publications

- Preparing and publishing materials for public including dealers, agents, advisory bodies and employees
- Helping out other departments to promote and publish event announcements and other event related advertisement materials

4. Marketing Publicity

- Announcing new products or services and enhancements in products and services, through editorial channels of mass media
- Developing and executing promotional materials
- Participating in exhibits and marketing events

5. Others

- Developing a good working climate for university
- Providing PR Services to other departments (photographic services, providing gift items, and etc.)
- Organizing PMU events
- Providing public information and issue visitors cards to access pmu library, buildings and grounds on request.
- Managing sponsorship
- Building and managing relationships with other companies.

Effect of Competition and Threat

Competition and opposition to management have tended to put organizations on the defensive and led to the adoption of tactics for misleading the public about themselves. According to Johnson and Johnson (2012), the more intense the competition or opposition to management, the more likely communication will be blocked or lies will be communicated. This was self-evident in Generals Babangida and Abacha regimes' Public communication since the annulment of the June 12, 1993's Presidential Election result when lies were persistently used to explain off the annulment. Also, Gibb (2011) observes that when organizations feel threatened or anticipates a threat, they think about how to win over or dominate their opposition parties, how to impress their 'god-father', how to keep from losing and to protect themselves from anticipated attacks.

Consequently, information considered to be potentially helpful to the 'enemy' are always withheld by organizations. Sometimes, a press conference or briefing is organized to plant misleading information in the media in order to deceive competitors, opposition and the public. At other times, carefully prepared advertorials and documentaries highlighting the organization are placed in the media for public consumption. But when the public begins to wonder whether it has been treated less responsibly than the organization looks after its interests, this lessens the potential of these tactics as positive information management strategies. This, of course, means that the organization is no longer seen as credible. The alternative left to the public will be to seek information about the issue

Conclusion

Information management, despite its importance to human existence, its laudable goals and, availability of efficiently run internal communications system to facilitate, it will be meaningless without a listening public. To have a listening public means to be credible; the information manager must be honourable and have public esteem; to be honourable and to have public esteem is to be known as having been reasonably fulfilling public expectations and is known as having been reasonably fulfilling public expeditions and having betrayed any trust. Besides, the information manager must not be seen to be protecting personal interest at the expense of public interest. And importantly, the public relations executive must make sure that what he says or tells the public corresponds to the realities of the situation at hand.

Recommendations

Based on the concept reviewed, the researcher made the following recommendations:

1. Organizations should always employ honourable people in the public relations units that will have public esteem.

2. The public relations units should always feed the public with credible information with public expectations.
3. Public relations units should be effective in communication to facilitate exchange of ideas, knowledge and information in order to reach a decision within a reasonable time.

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