PUBLIC RELATIONS AS A TOOL FOR EFFECTIVE CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIAN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT: Public relations practice is all about managing reputation and building favourable image for individuals, groups, organisations and entities. The basic principle of public relations is to ensure cordial relationship is maintained and sustained with stakeholders of an organisation, hence, avoiding crises in whatever form is sacrosanct to effective public relations practice. It is upon this basis that this study is premised on how public relations can serve as a tool to manage crises in Nigeria's tertiary institutions effectively. There is no gainsaying that tertiary institutions in Nigeria are peculiar with one form of crisis or the other due to the numerous stakeholders they engage with. Also, studies have been conducted on public relations practice in tertiary institutions, but not much has been done on usage of public relations tools for crisis management. As a result, this study is poised to examine the nature of public relations tools that can be deployed towards managing crises in Nigerian tertiary institutions. The study employed conceptual approach as a methodology, while the Excellence Theory was used as a justification. Thus, the study concluded that organisations cannot do without crises, especially when stakeholders of these organisations are numerous, multifaceted and diverse in nature. It is, however, a necessity for public relations managers in tertiary institutions to deploy the various tools, strategies and techniques of public relations to ensure crises are properly managed and, if possible, avoided.

Keywords: Crises, Management, Public Relations, Reputation, Institutions.

INTRODUCTION

It is observed that the aim of any business organisation is to achieve growth, increase in turn over, assets and profit, but all of these depend on the goodwill and public perception of such organisation; in terms of the quality of its products or services. Goodwill is secured not so much as a result of the organisation's mere existence, but as the sustained strategic planning, execution and evaluation of the perception of their publics in relation to the organisation. As noted by Udeze (2012, p. 16), "no matter how small or big a company is; it needs the services of public relations". Apart from profit-making organisations, non-commercial organisations and individual(s) can make use of public relations so far it deals with people (big or small) one way or the other, such require the use of public relations to build, maintain and sustain its reputation in the public domain, and to enhance good corporate image and understanding among bodies that it deals with. Thus, the place of public relations in the improvement of an organisation's image, managing crisis in an organisation, and overall management of reputation and goodwill cannot be overemphasised.

Therefore, public relations is an all-embracing concept that pervades the entire management process of today's commercial and non-commercial organisations, institutions, multinationals and conglomerates. It is largely a social philosophical and practical concept based on the premise that people matter, and that for environment of the modern society, and it is seen as adequately addressing itself to the peculiar needs and interests of all with whom it deals. According to the Public Relations Society of America (2012), public relations as a strategic communication process, builds mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics. Likewise, it studies the attitude of people (internal and external), formulates, and executes programmes of action through media channels to earn public acceptance. Furthermore, public relation entails correct communication, with the intention of persuasively gaining audiences' goodwill and having favourable image (Nyitse & Agbele, 2023). The media is the prominent channel that PR utilises in achieving its primary objectives, and it is the most prominent channel a typical public relations professional can employ in managing crisis in an organisation (Onyiaji & Okwumba, 2023).

However, Crisis/Crises in whatever form is inevitable in every society, group or organisation aspiring towards development, positive change and achieving set goals. As opined by Ogwuche, Samaila, Fasaanu and Oladimeji (2021), crisis is one of the banes to development in any society or organisation, hence, scholars have continued to advocate for intervention of stakeholders and experts anytime crisis ensued. Universities and tertiary institutions of learning are not left out in the concept of crisis. In fact, stakeholders in Nigerian universities most of the time do embark on protests, agitations and confrontations which sometimes may cause serious crisis if not properly managed by concerned authorities (Anarodo, 2015). It is however pertinent that public relations unit or office be set up across universities and tertiary institutions, so that crisis can be properly managed whenever they happen. There is no gainsaying that the ultimate goal of public relations is to maintain and sustain mutual relationship between an organisation and its stakeholders, as such, tertiary institutions cannot run smoothly without public relations efforts.

On the other hand, the British Institute of Public Relations (BIPR) cited in Adegoke (2015) defines public relations as the deliberate planned and sustained efforts, to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics. Public relations is an effort that is either deliberate or intentional, neither retroactive nor is it a fire bridge exercise. The aim of this effort is to establish and maintain mutual understanding. It involves two-way of communication system and effect so that an organisation may understand the public and the public(s) also understand the company (Itanyi & Ukpere, 2014). It implies a kind of social responsibility on the part of an organisation making it to deliberate and continuously undertakes course of action that are in its public best interest.

Moreover, going by the view of Sam Black, a Professor of Public Relations and former President of the International Public Relations Associations (IPRA) on what public relations constitutes, Adeyanju (2012) averred that public relations is the establishment of two-way communication to resolve conflicts of interests by seeking common grounds or areas of mutual interest and the establishment of understanding, based on truth, knowledge and full information. However, every public relations unit in a tertiary institution should always seek the best possible ways to build good image and reputation for the institution, as well as enhance good relationship between and among key stakeholders that are of importance (Omolayo & Ajila, 2014). There is no doubt that

stakeholders are part and parcel of the smooth running of every organisation; hence, the need to avoid crises with or among them and to prioritise their needs and interests is sacrosanct. Thus, this study examines the use of public relations as a tool for effective crises management in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Statement of the Problem

Public relations activities are considered a necessity in the administration of tertiary institutions, particularly the university. The public relations professional(s) or officers in charge of a university internal and external relation are always in the position to advice management on how to position the university to enhance its public image (Aikins & Adu-Oppong, 2015). In many institutions, public relations is bedeviled with various issues such as less attention from the management, lack of qualified personnel, zero budgeting among others (Adeyefa & Awofadeju, 2022). Various forms of crises are found across tertiary institutions in Nigeria today; chiefly among them include students' protests/riots, ASUU/NASU and allied union protests, communal conflicts, open confrontations among stakeholders, among others. It is however worrisome that majority of these crises can be managed or avoided peradventure there is effective conflict resolution mechanism available. This therefore laid credence to the importance of public relations professionals and experts in the administration of tertiary institutions.

Moreover, research has further proven that managements in various academic institutions neither recognise nor appreciate public relations efforts in building and projecting their corporate image, as well as managing crisis, unlike advertising, procurement, academic planning, ICT and other supporting units. This is due to the fact that they are of the opinion that public relations activities gulp too much funds and that it brings little impact on the institution (Asemah, Okpanachi & Olumuji, 2013).

However, every tertiary institution in Nigeria today, boasts of a public relations unit/department which is saddled with the responsibilities of managing both internal and external affairs; as well as official relations of the institution. As posited by Ijimakinwa, Adesanya and Ojo (2018), there are over 450 tertiary institutions in Nigeria as of the year 2022, and these institutions in different capacities boast of a public relations unit or section. Also, Inya (2017) emphasised that, it is noticeable that these institutions have had crises/issues that linked to breakdown of mutual understanding that required among others public relations interventions. Issues such as managing students' protests, staff strike/protests, bridge of communication between top management and disgruntled staff, between and among critical stakeholders of the institution.

Thus, given the relevance of stakeholders to the smooth running of every institution, and the importance of having a positive outlook/impression in the eyes of every member of the public, it becomes necessary to explore how public relations strategies and activities are used in safeguarding and improving the image of an organisation; vis-à-vis crises management, maintenance of cordial relationship with relevant stakeholders and avoiding crises at all times (Ijimakinwa, et al., 2018). Furthermore, various studies have been conducted in the field of public relations and influence on organisational performance, and its role towards harmonious existence between organisations and their host environments (see: Narteh, Akwensivie & Agyapong, 2012;

Amodu, 2012; Omolayo & Ajila, 2012; Itanyi & Ukpere, 2014; Kim & Jangyul, 2016; Ude-Akpeh et al., 2019; Oyeleke, 2020; Anani-Bossman, 2022; Adeyefa & Awofadeju, 2022; Narteh, 2023; Onyiaji & Okwumba, 2023; Nwakpu, 2023; and Nyitse & Agbele, 2023). However, there is inadequate information on the influence of public relations as a tool for effective crises management in Nigeria, especially in tertiary institutions. This is a gap that this study seeks to fill, by examining how public relations strategies guided by Excellence Theory of public relations, can mitigate crises which may arise from clash of interests and stakeholders' diversities in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of Public Relations

Public relations have been defined in various ways. The British Institute of Public Relations (IBPR) cited in Olayinka and Folorunsho, (2019) is a deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics. According to Hayward, cited in Adegoke (2014) public relations are the propagation of the personality of the organization. This states the importance of communication between the organization and its publics. Public relations project the management personality of which the public relations department represents, through their activities with the use of their perspective tool (that is, print and electronic media). Furthermore, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) cited in Uduji (2013) defines public relations as a distinctive management function which helps to establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and operation between an organization and its pubic.

Again, the World Assembly of Public Relations in Mexico cited in Uduji (2013) sees public relation as the arts and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organisation leaders, and implementing a planned programme of action which will serve both the organisation and the public interest. However, it is significant that the work of public relations is needed in almost every organisation (profit and non-profit organisations) and higher institutions of learning (universities, polytechnics colleges of education and other colleges). In fact, individuals in the society also need the services of public relations especially those individuals that are professional or experts such as musicians, politicians and others. Public relations assist organisation in so many ways by writing and distributing of e-releases, journals, e-conference, feedback, and many more.

Tools of Public Relations

1. **Press Releases:** The press release is the basic building block of a publicity programme concerned with story placement. This is where the important information about the product or services is summarized in a way that will catch the media's attention. Just as the marketer would customize the advertising message for each target, he needs to customize press releases for the various media he contacts.
2. **Fact Sheets:** A press release should be written so it can be used without any editing. That means all the relevant information must be included. There may be additional important

information that doesn't really fit into the press release. That's where the fact sheet comes in. Fact sheets include more detailed information on the product, its origins, and its particular features.

3. **Press Kits:** The press kit pulls together all the press releases, fact sheets and accompanying photographs about the product into one neat package. A comprehensive folder can serve as an attention-getter and keep the provided materials organised.

4. **Video News Releases:** The video news release is the video equivalent of a press release. Prepared for use by television stations, the typical video news release runs about 90 seconds and can be used to highlight some important features of the product. These are called infomercials.

5. **Employee/Member Relation Programme:** An organization's employees are an extremely important internal public. Corporate public relations people often spend a great deal of time in developing employee communication programmes, including regular newsletter, informational bulletin boards and internet postings. In service organisations these kinds of activities can be used to support brand communication efforts.

6. **Community Relations Programme:** It is critical that companies maintain the role of good community citizens within the markets where they have offices and manufacturing facilities. Many companies actively encourage their employees to take part in community organisations, and local corporations are often major sponsors of community events and activities such as art presentations, blood donation drives, and educational activities. Tata Group of Companies highlights its community relationship-based communications for building a strong brand image within the local community and stakeholders at large.

7. **Financial Relations Programme:** Most of the brand-marketing organisations are publicly held companies. Financial relations have become a key aspect of public relations activity. Downturns in company earnings quickly lead to decline in stock prices, leading to the exit of top executives. Financial relations people are responsible for establishing and maintaining relationships with the investment community, including industry analysers, stock-brokers and journalists specialisng in financial reporting.

8. **Events:** Companies can draw attention to new products or other company activities by arranging special events like news conferences, seminars, exhibits, contests, anniversaries, sponsorship in sports and cultural events.

9. **Publications:** Companies rely on extensively on published materials to reach and influence their target markets. These include annual reports, brochures, articles, magazines etc.

Publics of Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

Every tertiary institution in Nigeria has its specific and generic publics, but in this context, reference is made to the generic publics of any higher educational institution. As earlier mentioned above, the institution interacts with different segments of the publics who by implication constitute the framework of its relevant publics. Thus, Igben (2022) highlights the following as the generic publics of a typical higher educational institution:

1. Government (Federal, State and Local)
2. The Governing Council
3. Employees (including all categories of staff)

4. The students' population (including former, current and prospective)
5. Host community
6. Parents
7. Unions
8. National Educational Agencies and Commissions (NUC, JAMB, NYSC, NBTE, ITF, e.t.c)

Crisis and Crisis Management

Crisis entails adverse event, a great and sudden calamity that needs immediate addressing. It can be man-made or may occur due to natural reasons. Famines, droughts, cyclones, earthquakes tidal waves, insurgency, terrorism, wars, epidemics, corporate warfare, employee agitations, project closures, product recalls, and scams et al, all qualify to be called as crises. Each crisis is unique and needs special handling, keeping in view the enormity of the crisis, stakeholders involved and who would be in charge of managing the crisis.

However, crisis management entails channelling efforts and adequate resources in the avoidance and control of crisis situation. It includes resolution, arbitration, reconciliation; among other ways of settling crisis or ensuring they did not happen. One common trend among all kinds of crises is the importance of communication in various stages of the crisis. Crisis as an event may lead to an unstable and dangerous situation affecting an individual, group, or all of society. They are negative changes in the human or environmental affairs, especially when they occur abruptly, with little or no warning. A crisis poses a significant threat to an individual, organisation, or community, often requiring immediate attention and action to prevent or mitigate harm. Thus, accordingly, crises can be categorised into three types:

1. Internal crises (e.g., product recall, employee misconduct)
2. External crises (e.g., natural disasters, economic downturns)
3. Management crises (e.g., leadership failure, communication breakdown)

Forms of Crises

According to Ojebuyi and Ekennia (2015), crisis may be internal or external, but they emanates in various forms. These forms include but not limited to the following:

i. Political crisis
ii. Economic crisis
iii. Religious crisis
iv. Social issues
v. Organisational crisis
vi. Geographic/Communal crisis
vii. Situational crisis

Public Relations Tools and Activities in Tertiary Institutions

According to Imahiyereobo (2023), higher educational institutions use proven public relations tools and activities to stir up positive attitudes and behaviours in their strategic publics. The choice of which one to use depends on so many factors which include financial constraints, nature and scope of public relations needs, the environment factor as to whether competitive or monopolistic, as well as political factor which may thrust up regulatory policies and regulations. According to him, these tools include the following for building the corporate image of the various institutions of higher learning:

1. Media Relations
2. Advertorials
3. Social media include school websites, Facebook page and WhatsApp Group
4. Newsletters on its activities
5. Community relations
6. Gifts items (especially during the yuletide season)
7. Brochures, handbook and catalogue
8. Sponsorship or partnership
9. Speaking engagement
10. Business events
11. Liaison between the Governing Councils, associated unions, the staff, students and the government, state or federal.

Empirical Studies

There is a great significance of the study under review with the work of Ude-Akpeh, Ginikachukwu and Dung (2019) which investigated the application of public relations techniques in managing the image and reputation of NTA Television College Jos. The study employed the survey method as a research design. Findings showed that the NTA television college is using PR strategies in relating to its various publics, and applies it in reputation management which has positively impacted the productivity of the college. The study concluded that PR can be used to enhance and manage the image and reputation of an organization for better results, while it was recommended that definite public relations department be set up at the college, with a clearly defined role. Also, Nkeme and Nya (2018) conducted a study on the evaluation of indigenous communication media for agricultural information dissemination in the Southern zone of Akwa-Ibom – Nigeria. Also, interview and focus group discussion (FGD) were used as research design, while findings showed that the commonly used indigenous communication media was village debate and the choice of village debate as a means of communication was due to ease of usage and understanding. Thus, it was recommended that extension agents of the Agricultural Development Programme of the state should inculcate community-based media into agricultural extension innovation packages.

In another view, Kim, and Jangyul (2016) did a study on the effect of public relations and corporate reputation on return on investment and found that the value of public relations to corporations remains unsolved in the domain of PR research. Though, he agrees that PR is an effective strategy to improving on return on investment, the study identified causal relationships among variables

while findings were analysed using structural equation modeling (SEM). The researcher found out that there was a correlation between the complexity of an organization and the size and formality of its public relations department. It concluded that even a smaller outfit can enhance its reputation through its public relations department thereby improving on its return on investment. Concomitantly, Isa (2015) carried out a study on ASUU struggles and the revitalization of public university education in Nigeria. The study employed a conceptual approach through library and archival research as a methodological consideration. Findings showed that ASUU is one of the few surviving formidable pressure groups in Nigeria, and that its struggles are aimed towards reviving the public university system in the country. It was recommended that, eternal vigilance is needed by university teachers and workers, students and their parents as well as other critical interest groups so as to revitalise the university system and restored it lost glory.

Furthermore, Oyeleke (2020) in her study on public relations and crisis management at Federal Teaching Hospital, Abakaliki and University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital, Enugu, examined public relations practice and crisis management in the two selected teaching hospitals. The study utilised survey design as a methodology, while findings revealed that the various public relations and crisis management strategies employed by the public relations team of the hospitals have significant effects on staff performance. The study recommends that a public relations strategy should be developed within the context of the organisation's vision, mission, corporate culture and policies. Also, the need for continuous engagement of stakeholders in dialogue, mediation, sensitisation programme and negotiation with the aim of resolving industrial disputes, management and staff union disputes were proffered as part of recommendations.

Moreover, Fatile and Adejuwon (2011) studied conflict and conflict management in tertiary institutions: the case of Nigerian universities. The study was conducted based on the unavoidability of conflict as an attendant feature of human interaction, hence the need for proper management for the sake of peace and progress in human society. The research employed narrative technique through robust interrogation of literature as a methodology, while findings revealed that students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria engaged in conflict for one reason or another. Furthermore, findings showed that these conflicts do lead to full-blown crisis with various outcomes like: prolonged strike, destruction of lives and properties, insecurity among others. Thus, the study recommended that school authorities should be more democratic in handling crises and conflict situations in higher institutions. Students' involvement in decision-making process was also proffered as part of mechanisms for resolving crises in tertiary institutions.

Theoretical Framework: Excellence Theory of Public Relations

The excellence theory was propounded by Grunig in 1985. It is a general theory of public relations that specifies how public relations makes organisations more effective; how it is organised and managed when it contributes most to organisational effectiveness. The theory resulted from a study about the best practice in public relations, which was headed by J.E. Grunig and funded by the Foundation of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC). According to Grunig, the theory is helpful in explaining the value of public relations to an organisation and identifying the characteristics of a public relations function that increase its value. It also identified characteristics of effective public relations in four major categories:

1. Empowerment of public relations functions: effective organisations must empower public relations as a critical management function.
2. Communicator roles: let public relations professionals play managerial role as well as administrative role.
3. Organisation of communication function: public relations should be an integrated communication function and separate from, instead of being sublimated to marketing or other management functions.
4. Public relations models: An effective organisation should base its internal and external communication and relationship building on a two-way symmetrical model.

However, the theory was premised on the goal attainment of an organisation through effective public relations functions (Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2017). This theory is considered adequate for this study since every tertiary institution now has public relations units that consider various forms of publics, of which students, staff, management staff and host community is part of. Other theories of public relations practice such as Stakeholders Theory, AIDA Model and Media Dependency Theory do not adequately capture the study under review because they were majorly tilted towards maintaining cordial relationship with stakeholders as well as how to attract attention, interest and desire of these stakeholders towards taking necessary action. The Excellence Theory however focused on how to ensure two-way communication between management and stakeholders, hence priortising feedback as an important concept in crisis management. Hence, the suitability of Excellence Theory for this study, compared with other relevant theories. Therefore, it is pertinent that public relations units in tertiary institutions emphasise feedbacks in their activities, so as to build virile relationship that will ensure crises are properly managed and evaded, as well as boost the image of the institution.

Methodological Consideration

This study adopted conceptual method to thematically analyse various concepts such as Public Relations, Crisis Management, Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria, among others. Various databases that were searched for literature include Google Scholar, ELSEIVEIR and JSTOR, while studies that were published between year 2012 and 2024 are the ones included. The literature works were dissected and analysed so as to have deeper understanding of the need for public relations tools in managing crises in tertiary institutions.

Conclusion

Crises management is one of the responsibilities of public relations. Hence, it is sacrosanct to ensure that organisations and groups evade crises and build themselves on trust, favourable image and a positive reputation among their respective stakeholders. There is no gainsaying that organisations cannot do without crises, especially when stakeholders of these organisations are numerous, multifaceted and diverse in nature. It is however a necessity for public relations managers in tertiary institutions to deploy the various tools, strategies and techniques of public relations to ensure crises are properly managed and if possible, avoided. Of course, it is better to do a kind of damage control rather than damage repair. Hence, public relations can serve as a potent tool in effectively managing crises in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Moreover, management of tertiary institutions should endeavour to make budgetary provisions for public relations, while staff of the PR unit should be subjected to mandatory continuous professional training that will ensure effectiveness of their job. Further studies can also be conducted in the aspect of sourcing empirical data from public relations professionals in tertiary institutions; either through interviews or survey.

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