

Proactive Corporate Management and the Dynamics of Public Relations

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ABSTRACT In Nigeria, public relations has not always been accorded its pride of place in organizational set-up. At best it comes to play as a fire-brigade approach to solve organizational problems during stresses and conflicts. This paper took a look at the public relations function vis-a-vis the management process and advocates effective public relations planning that will create a positive image in the eyes of a corporation's publics. It gave suggestions on how to manage the public relations function so that it can lead to proactive corporate management and concluded that the public relations manager should be given a board director status and should work to foster constructive and socially acceptable work ethics that would endear his company to its publics.

INTRODUCTION

The primary role of Public Relations is to manage a company's reputation and help build public consent for its enterprises. Today's business environment has become so competitive that public consent can no longer be assumed; it must be earned continuously. The term public relations is widely misunderstood, and misused. Part of the confusion is due to the fact that public relations cover a very broad area. Depending on the context and one's point of view, it can be a concept, a profession, a management function, or a practice.

For this purpose, Public Relations is defined as a management function that focuses on the relationships and communications that individuals and organizations have with other groups (publics) for the purpose of creating mutual goodwill (Arens, 1999: 310).

Every company, organization, or government body has relationships with groups of people who are affected by what it does or says. They may be employees, customers, stockholders, competitors, suppliers, legislators, or the community in which the organization resides. Marketing professionals refer to these people as stakeholders because they all have some vested interest in the organization's publics, and goal of public relations is to develop and maintain goodwill, with most of, if not all, of its publics. Failure to do so may mean loss of customers and revenues, time lost dealing with complaints or lawsuits, and loss of esteem which weakens the organization's brand equity as well as its ability to secure financing, make sales, and expand.

For these reasons, public relations is bound to perform a management function which will help the organization or company in performing its day to day activities.

As a management function, public relations encompass the following:

- Anticipating, analyzing and interpreting public opinion, attitudes and issues which might impact, for good or ill, the operations and plans of the organization.
- Counseling management at all levels in the organization with regard to policy decisions, courses of action and communicate to achieve informed public understanding necessary to the success of an organization's aim. These may include marketing, financial, fund raising, employee, community or government relations and other programmes.
- Planning and implementing the organization's efforts to influence or change public policy.
- Setting objectives, planning, budgeting, recruiting, training staff, and developing facilities.
- Technical knowledge and skills are required for opinion research, public issues analyses, media relations, direct mail, institutional advertising, publications, film/video productions, special events, speeches and presentations.

Public Relations embrace the total communication of the total organization, and it is a discipline that performs enormous, significant and indispensable functions in any organization.

WHAT IS MANAGEMENT?

According to Stoner et al. (2001: 27), manage-

ment is the practice of consciously and continually shaping an organization. All organizations have people who are responsible for helping them achieve their goals.

Management therefore could be seen as the process of planning, organizing, leading and controlling the work of organization members and of using all available organizational resources to reach stated organizational goals.

Management is a specialty that deals with matters of time and human relations as they arise in organizations. The idea about time in an organization has several elements.

- Management in an attempt to create a desirable future keeps the past and the present in mind.
- Management is practiced as a reflection of a particular given era.
- Management is a practice that produces consequences and effect that emerge over time.

The importance of human relationship also involves several ideas.

- i) Managers act in a two-way relationship with each party influencing the other.
- ii) Managers act in relationship that have spillover effect for other people for better or for worse.
- iii) Managers juggle multiple simultaneous relationships.

THE MANAGEMENT PROCESS

The practice of management according to Stoner et al. (2001: 28) has over the years being classified into four specific functions of managing, planning, organizing, controlling.

Thus, we can say that management is the process of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling the effort of organizational members and all other organizational resources to achieve stated organizational goals.

A process is a systematic way of doing things. We refer to management as a process to emphasize that all managers regardless of their particular aptitudes or skill, engage in certain interrelated activities in order to achieve their desired goals.

Planning: This is the process of establishing goals and a suitable course of action for achieving those goals. Planning simply implies that managers think through their goals and actions in advance and that their actions are based on

some methods, plan or logic rather than on human beings.

Relationship and time are central planning activities. Planning produces a picture of desirable future circumstances; an endeavour involving many relationships.

Plans made by top management charged with responsibility for the organization as a whole may cover periods as long as 5 years to 10 years, while in some other organizations may span much shorter periods.

Organizing: This is the process of engaging two or more people to work together in a structured way to achieve a specific goal or set goals.

Also, it is the process of arranging and allocating work, authority, and resources among an organization's members so that they can achieve organizational goals.

Organizing produces a structure for relationships in an organization, as it is through these structured relationships that future plans will be pursued.

Leading: This is the process of directing and influencing the task – related activities of group members of an entire organization. This also involves directing, influencing and motivating employees to perform essential tasks. Relationship and time are central to leading activities. Infact, leading gets to the heart of management relationship with each of the people working with it. Managers lead in an attempt to persuade others to join them in pursuit of the future that emerges from the planning and organizational steps.

Controlling: This is the process of ensuring that actual activities conform to planned activities. The managers must be sure that actions of the organizational members do infact move the organization towards its stated goals. This is the controlling function of management and it involves these main elements:

1. Establishing standards of performance.
2. Measuring members current performance
3. Comparing performance to the established standards.
4. Taking corrective action if deviations are detected.

MAKING DECISIONS

According to Heller and Hindle (1998: 52), decisions are essential part of life-in and out of a

work environment. Decision-makers are those who are responsible for making a crucial judgement between two or more alternatives.

According to Mullins (1996: 45), a decision could be described as judgement of choices between two or more alternatives, that arise in an infinite number of situations from resolution of a problem to the implementation of a course of action. Managers of people, by definition must be decision makers.

However, according to Stoner et al. (2001: 66), there is a connection between decision making and the idea that managers deal with time and human relations. Decision-making, is the process of identifying and selecting a course of action to deal with a problem or take advantage of an opportunity which is at one's disposal.

Managers draw inspiration from past performance, present circumstances, and future expectations when making decisions. In addition, when managers project possible consequences of their decisions, they must be conscious that other people's decisions may conflict or align with their own.

The rational model of decision making (and problem solving) assumes that most effective decisions result when managers follow a four step process in estimating the situation developing alternatives, evaluating alternatives and selecting the best one, implementing the decision and following it up.

Above all, it is clear that the process of management is not an easy one and thus, it should be noted here that between management and public relations, there exists a mutual understanding. As the process of management need planning, controlling, leading and organizing, so do public relations.

PUBLIC RELATIONS PLANNING

Planning according to the management process is a process of establishing goals and a suitable course of action for achieving these goals. There are three reasons why we plan public relations programmes; they are:

1. To set target for public relations operations against which result can be amended.
2. To select priorities which will control the number and the timing of different operations in the programme.
3. To eliminate the working hours and other costs involved.

Without planning, the practitioners would probably be starting new projects which are abandoned after they had gulped millions of naira. Therefore, there is the need to appreciate the current situation of an organization before any programme of action is embarked upon.

APPRECIATION OF THE SITUATION

Logical Planning: Here, it is necessary to carry out an investigation. This is so that there would be adequate understanding of the situation in which the company is currently involved. The major question that arises at this point is, where are we now? So before any public relations programme is executed, the Public Relations manager should be clear on where the organization currently stands, so as to prepare a way forward for it.

The Transfer Process: The public relations transfer process is a situation whereby, public relations practitioners are confronted to change negative attitude into positive ones; ultimately, knowledge creates understanding. Usually tolerance may be an admirable public relations objective, but it is difficult to tolerate something which is improperly understood. However, these negative attitudes may be seen in four stages: they include:

Hostility: This is a situation whereby a consumer already has a negative feeling about a product either before or after the product or service gets into the market.

However, a public relations practitioner is to convert this feelings of hostility to sympathy.

Prejudice: According to Ajala (2001: 91), the causes of prejudice may be parental, educational, religious, social or class influences, environment, or just plain misunderstanding. Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, may be applicable here. At first, people have conservative attitudes to new ideas and resist change, but once they have become converted to the acceptance of a new idea, they become enthusiastic supporters.

Apathy: This is the worst enemy of understanding. Disinterest can be the product of selfishness, laziness, lack of imagination, or a result of the subject not having been presented in an interesting and convincing way. So since people are so wrapped up in their own interests and unconcerned about other matters, a public relations practitioner would thus have to create

a strategy where it would bring interest and concern to those particular people. So, the secret of successful public relations information according to Ajala (2001: 89), is interest and value to recipients.

Ignorance: It has been established that it is very easy to imagine that other people are as familiar with a subject as we are ourselves, but such an assumption is often false and dangerous; ignorance is wide-spread. Therefore, we have to accept that it is necessary to compete for a place in people's mind and memories, thus creating knowledge.

THE FOUR-FOLD TASK OF THE PUBLIC RELATIONS MANAGER

According to Jefkins (1998: 152), the task of the Public Relations manager can be seen as:

- a) To establish and maintain a correct image of the organization and of its policies, products, services, personnel;
- b) To monitor outside opinion and convey this intelligence to management;
- c) To advice management on communication problems, solutions and techniques;
- d) To inform publics about policies, activities, products and services and personnel so that maximum knowledge and understanding are won.

MANAGING THE PUBLIC RELATIONS FUNCTIONS

According to Ajala (1993: 119), public relations is regarded, more and more today, as a management process in itself. Like other management processes, public relations demands setting clear objectives, planning strategies, detailing out appropriate tactics and techniques, the outcome of which are reflected in organizational reputation and subsequently in profit margins. The public relations function is extended to the marketing, production, personnel, finance and services departments of an organization. The scope of public relations tasks is that these departments fall into four main areas: counseling, media relation, liaison and managing events.

Counseling involves advising administrators

on alternative options and recommending strategic choice in the light of public responsibilities to enable management make appropriate policy decisions. Media relations involves, coordinating relationships with print and electronic media. The work involves arranging and monitoring press interviews, writing news release, organizing press conferences and answering media enquiries. Liaison has to do with facilitating communication between the organization and its external environment, both in the public and private sectors.

Managing events involves coordinating special events for the organization. Such events like corporate celebrations, annual general meetings, exhibitions, launching and awards ceremonies, are better coordinated for the organization by the public relations practitioner.

PROACTIVE CORPORATE IDENTITY MANAGEMENT

Corporate identity is the sum of the visual cues by which the public recognizes the company and differentiates it from others. An effective media relations can be achieved by designing, establishing and promoting proactive corporate identity. A well-managed corporate identity enhances the speed and efficiency with which an organization copes with crises as well as the degree of openness it demonstrates towards the media in good and bad times.

A well managed corporate identity is a natural attention pillar. That is why when news about the organization or company comes, especially when it is very obvious that it can come from any angle, it should be well attended to and managed, be it either good or bad news.

Dealing with the media on regular basis is an enterprise that can sometimes leave a public relations professional frustrated and harassed. One appears to be doing all the right things, yet the outcome is hardly what is intended.

Bad news come in many forms: it could come on the pages of an otherwise respectable journal, linking top management with societies. It shouts from the headline of major story of the nation's most influential newspapers, it comes in the cartoons, it comes out of radio and television interviews, feature pages in magazines, and a host of other places.

A proactive management function is that

companies and organizations should prevent these news from leaking, and this can be achieved through an efficient public relations department that should ensure the following:

- (i) Establish and maintain confidence and goodwill of the media gatekeepers – accuracy, integrity and performance are the key terms.
- (ii) Don't beg to have stories used. Trying to pressure publicity into news brings resentment from credible journalists.
- (iii) Don't flood the media with many news releases at once, it identifies the practitioner as being untrained or incompetent.
- (iv) Provide media men with interesting, timely stories and pictures that they want, when they want them and in the form in which they can readily use them.

In spite of the above preventive measures, once in a while corporate image may stand the chance of being dented by the media. When bad news come, Ajala (1993: 167) recommends the following actions:

- (a) Set the record straight. First think about the source of the problem. Did we do something unethical? It is due to ignorance on the part of the reporter? Or is he seriously biased?
- (b) Do an in-house cleaning first, particularly if investigations reveal that something went wrong internally.
- (c) Respond with a friendly brief letter/phone call or visit send your letter to the reporter, with a copy to the editor/producer.
- (d) Since your objective is to get positive publicity, do not repeat the negative.

PUBLIC RELATIONS AS A MANAGEMENT FUNCTION

Today's Chief Executives and management require the assistance and advice of skilled specialists. It does not matter whether the size, nature and scope of organization are those of a local hospital, federal or state department, private consultancy, restaurant or hotel, university campus or a service industry, broadcasting house, manufacturing or distributing industry. All are faced with complexity of laws and regulations, financial and human problems and competitive factors too great for one person to handle; the public relations officer, manager or consultant is a specialist. His natural responsibility to the management, according to Osuji (1999: 10) falls in three areas:

- (i) To facilitate and ensure an inflow of representative opinions from the organization's publics so that policies and operations may be in tune with the needs and views of these publics.
- (ii) To advise management on ways and means of maintaining or reshaping operations or communications policies to gain maximum public acceptance
- (iii) To devise and carry out programmes that will favourably interpret the organization's policies and operations.

Professor Edward Robison of Boston University USA in Adegoke (2001: 48) describes Public Relations as:

- (i) Deliberate, planned and sustained, and that public relations as management function measure, evaluate and interpret the attitudes of relevant publics;
- (ii) Assisting management in defining objectives for ascertaining public understanding and acceptance of an organization's products, plans, policies and personnel;
- (iii) Equating those objectives with the interests and goals of the relevant publics;
- (iv) Developing, executing and evaluating a programme to earn public understanding and acceptance.

Adegoke (2001: 59) explains that the implication of these for professional public relation practices in Nigeria are as follows:

- a. The public relations person should work directly with top management, preferably the chief executive; he should also attend all board meetings in advisory position
- b. He should be actively involved in management discussions and decisions and should be commensurately empowered.
- c. He should have abundant information on current activities and future plans of every division or unit of his organization.
- d. An establishment must have a strategic focus and its activities must be in tune with the interests of its various publics.

These are the vital criteria which will enable a public relations officer to perform effectively. Where he is bereft of information about his organization, he cannot represent his company with the desired confidence. Also, he will not be in a position to effectively counsel corporate executive on how to positively impact the companies' various publics.

CONCLUSION

A corporation may operate in a completely legal, technically sound and financially efficient manner and yet find itself viewed by segments of the public as cold, greedy and lacking cherished social values. It is the duty of the public relations officer to see that this scenario does not occur. Therefore, the role of a public relations person in management cannot be overemphasized. Any good management outfit in Nigeria needs a public relations practitioner to guide the improvement, growth, planning and execution of organization goals.

However, it should be noted that the public relations practitioner is not a mere party organizer, as it is being misconstrued by many indigenous companies in the country; but instead must work with the Chief Executive and other members of the board, because his contributions as a person can go a long way to make or mar the organization.

Ideally, the Public Relations Manager should have a board director status; as is the practice in the world's most successful companies, and

should work to foster constructive and socially acceptable behaviour in and outside his organization to convince the public that the firm is a worthy, caring and effective corporate entity.

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