

Assessment of Public Relations' Practice of Edo State University Uzairue, Edo State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The study was carried out to assess public relations' practice of Edo State University Uzairue. The study was predicated on Systems Theory (ST). The objectives were to determine the extent whether or not the Institution has a functional public relations department and to evaluate the extent of its public relations activities' effectiveness, amongst others. Interview schedule was used to elicit information from the public relations office headed by the public relations officer. Findings indicates, amongst others, that the University has a public relations office, but does not have public relations department, and that the extent of her public relations activities' effectiveness is average, amongst others. Given the above and the enormity of the importance of public relations to the educational institutions, the study, thus, recommend that Edo State University Uzairue should set-up a PR department with its ancillary compliments; step-up, and also, utilise effective public relations strategies in order to achieve effectiveness in its public relations' campaigns or activities.

KEYWORDS

public relations; practice; Edo State University

INTRODUCTION

Public relations is valued and regarded as a management role that maintains and perpetuates a positive image, understanding, and mutually beneficial interactions between an organisation and its constituents. Grunig and Hunt (1984) elaborate on the preceding (Public Relations) as the management of communication between an organisation and its publics. Similarly, researchers believed that public relations is the process of controlling and releasing information to the public from an individual or an institution (such as a business, government agency, or non-profit organisation) in order to influence public perception. Seitel (2007) distinguished between public relations and advertising; and Publicity and Public relations, thus – public relations may include an individual or an organisation gaining exposure to their audiences through topics of public interest and news items that do not require direct payments, as opposed to advertising, which does and is a form of marketing communications; and public relations as one that is internally controlled, whereas publicity is not. Over the years, public relations (PR) have proven to be a tool that individuals and organisations (both private and public) cannot live without. According to Richard and Umor (2020), public relations is an excellent and cost-effective means of improving the image of an individual, organisation, social groupings, products, or services, among others. Given the foregoing, public relations practise comprises a wide range of activities with varying purposes that aim to assist organisations in developing and

sustaining the variety of relationships that ensure their long-term success. - It encourages increased productivity, corporate discipline, and a peaceful industrial ecology, as well as persuades people of an individual's, institution's, or organization's credibility, performance, potentials, and the quality of its offered products or services. Furthermore, public relations provide benefits such as developing good relationships with both internal and external publics, as well as increasing brand awareness. As a result of the foregoing, organisations, as well as higher institutions, should have a functional public relations unit or department to ensure appropriate management of the organization's ties with its publics, amongst other things. Scholars agree that this promotes a positive image, a stronger reputation for the organisation, and a favourable climate for the growth of economic activities. Edo State University Uzairue, as an organisation and tertiary institution engaged in the business of manpower development, is not exempt from these prescriptions, and against the backdrop that an institution that operates without a public relations unit or a corporate communication department is doomed to fail or make obvious mistakes detrimental to the organization's success. Instructively, the preceding multiplies and magnifies the significance of public relations practise in tertiary institutions, particularly at Edo State University Uzairue, and its potential to positively ensure the Institution's image. In view of the foregoing, this study intends to evaluate Edo State University Uzairue's Public Relations practise and efficacy, among other things.

Problem Statement

Public relations, according to Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2006), is a management function that identifies, builds, and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the publics on which its success or failure is dependent. Given the foregoing, Public Relations is critical to an organization's performance and achievement of its organisational goals. In light of this, academics argue that the importance of public relations cannot be overstated. Similarly, Public Relations is defined as a strategic communication strategy that fosters mutually beneficial relationships between corporations and their target audiences while also establishing and maintaining a positive image for the institution or individual (Saylor Foundation, 2016). This indicates that policies are carefully conceived, developed, and enforced in order to maintain strong relationships with the public and to ensure that the organization's image is always positive. Tertiary institutions, such as Edo State University Uzairue, are examples of organisations that researchers suggest should try to maintain a positive public image, mutually beneficial connections, and understanding with their internal and external audiences at all times. This is necessary because of the growing number of postsecondary schools in Nigeria, as well as the fierce competition among them for potential students. The available evidence suggests that there is a link between an organisation with good public relations practise and a good image; understanding and mutually beneficial relationship; thus, this research to, among other things, ascertain the state of public relations practise at Edo State University Uzairue.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are to:

1. Find out whether or not Edo State University Uzairue has a public relations' unit.
2. Ascertain the level of public relations' activities carried-out by Edo State University Uzairue.
3. Evaluate the extent of the public relations' practice's effectiveness at Edo State University Uzairue.

Research Questions

1. Does Edo State University Uzairue have a functional Public Relations department?
2. What is the level of public relations' activities carried out by Edo State University Uzairue?
3. What is the extent of the Edo State University Uzairue public relations' practice's effectiveness?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public relations is an important component of the promotion mix, and it refers to the wide range of activities carried out by a company to defend and promote the image of the firm, its goods, and policies in the eyes of the general public (Pranashree 2020). Scholars believe that the goal of public relations is to manage an organization's public perception. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) defined public relations as the art and social science of analysing trends, projecting their effects, counselling organisational leaders, and implementing a plan of action that serves both the organisation and the public interest. Similarly, public relations seek to educate the public, prospective customers, investors, partners, employees, and other stakeholders in order to persuade them to hold a favourable opinion of an organisation or an individual, its products and services, its leadership structure, or even its political decisions. In the same vein, the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) asserts that every organisation, no matter how large or small, is ultimately dependent on its reputation and success, as in today's competitive market, reputation can be a company's most valuable asset, as it is what distinguishes it and gives it a competitive edge. This indicates that successful public relations help an organisation create and manage its reputation, as well as fosters improved communication and interactions with the organization's internal and external publics. According to Pranashree (2020), the following are the functions of public relations:

- i) *Press relations*: putting information about an organisation in an extremely positive light
- ii) *Product Publicity*: This relates to the broadcast of information in order to generate and boost publicity for products and services.
- iii) *Effective communication*: Public relations accomplishes this through building and promoting an organization's understanding through internal and external communication.
- iv) *Counselling*: During both good and bad times, public relations practitioners advise management on public concerns, the company's position, and reputation.

Promoting Lobbying: Dealing with legislators or the government is required in order to favour or discourage a specific piece of legislation or regulation.

Furthermore, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) argues that the major goal of public relations is to assist an organisation in developing, maintaining, and sustaining mutually beneficial connections with its publics, among other things.

Public Relations in Educational Institutions

According to Wherry (1982), no exact records indicate when public relations began in the educational sector, but what exists are historical developments' accounts of educational public relations, which scholars argue began a few years after Bernays first coined the term "public relations counsel" in his 1923 book, titled "Crystallizing Public Opinion." The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) defines educational public relations as a planned and methodical management function that aids in the improvement of an educational organization's programmes and services. According to the National

Society of Public Relations Association (NSPRA), educational public relations is based on a comprehensive two-way communication process involving both internal and external publics, with the goal of stimulating a better understanding of the organization's role, objectives, accomplishments, and needs. Aside from the foregoing, educational public relations programmes aid in the interpretation of public attitudes, the identification and shaping of policies and procedures in the public interest, and the continuation of involvement and information activities that win public understanding and support. Similarly, Cherenon (2017) discusses and advances the following arguments to support the value of public relations in educational institutions:

- i) **The media age:** Communication requirements have grown in complexity and number. Public relations experts are needed to assist schools in navigating the present chaotic, multi-channel communication landscape and strengthening their reputations, connections, and brands by integrating messaging across the paid/earned/shared/owned media spectrum (PESO)
- ii) **The Outrage Industry:** The outrage business refers to the perennially furious voices in the marketplace of ideas, and they now have a larger, more powerful voice thanks to blogs, forums, and anonymous comment on news websites. Unfortunately, schools fall into the trap of succumbing into the outrage industry, which can only be avoided by implementing good public relations plans and practises.
- iii) **Communication impacts education:** Communication is crucial in determining the type and quality of parent/community involvement. There is a strong link between increased family and community involvement and increased student academic involvement. This is a relationship that can only be established through public relations.

Aside from the aforementioned benefits, public relations helps educational institutions improve their brand visibility, making it easier for the target audience to obtain information about the institution without having to make a physical visit, which aids in the creation and maintenance of a favourable image. It also assists these schools in raising finances and soliciting donations, disseminating information about admission cycles, placement seasons, festivals or events, crisis situation management, and other activities. Similarly, public relations aids in the development of international academic collaborations, which are essential for nearly every institution these days, by providing global exposure to institutions and fostering academic collaborations with foreign universities through exchange programmes, international accreditation/degrees, and research partnerships (Business Standard, 2020). Given the foregoing, it is safe to conclude that the value of public relations to educational institutions and the education industry cannot be overstated.

Effective Public Relations

Scholars argue that tracking the advantages and efficacy of public relations operations is challenging. This has resulted in a slew of recommendations from academics in an attempt to establish some measures that may be used to assess the efficacy and impact of public relations campaigns or activities. Patel (2007) defines the metric as Sales statistics, Social media reach, social media engagements, Media impressions, Brand mentions, Keyword rankings, social shares, Website traffic, Number of backlinks, Lead generation; and asserts that the data of the above metrics must be collected prior to the start of the campaign and compared to the end result to determine the correct impact of the PR campaign. Walker, on the other hand, identified the following:

- i) **Press Clippings:** The number of press clippings comparing the institution or its products and services demonstrates how effective public relations is at that institution. When a firm or establishment receives a high number of mentions in targeted media channels, the public relations campaign is successful in boosting awareness for the establishment.
 - ii) **Media Impressions:** The amount of media impressions for a specific time period reflects the efficacy of an establishment's public relations. This is accomplished by multiplying the overall circulation of the journal in which it appeared by the number of press clippings.
 - iii) **Content Analysis:** This entails businesses monitoring the content of articles published on or about the company. It's one thing to have excellent articles; it's quite another to have quality articles that properly encapsulate the brand's core messaging.
 - iv) **Website Traffic:** When there is a noticeable increase in traffic on the website before and after the campaign is launched, public relations spending have shown to be effective.
 - v) **Lead Sourcing:** to know if the PR efforts of the establishment influences the clients' decision-making, asking the new customers how they heard about the company would help in determining when press coverage covers sales.
 - vi) **Market Surveys:** Before launching a public relations campaign, market research is conducted to determine whether or not people have heard of your business and its services. The poll is repeated after the PR campaign has been launched to determine whether or not awareness figures are rising upward. If they are, the public relations initiatives were effective and successful.
 - vii) **Social Media Mentions:** If the number of social media mentions of a brand or organisation increases following the introduction of various public relations programmes, the public relations unit or department is doing an excellent job.
- It should be noticed that when gleaned, the two sets of metrics are similar.

Theoretical framework

The study used System Theory (ST), which was developed by Von Bertalanffy Ludwig in the 1940s and expanded on by Ross W. Ashby and Georgy Bateson. The Theory assumes that rather than thriving in isolation, the component pieces of a system may be best understood in the context of their connections with each other and with other systems. This is what public relations is to an organisation, operating as a necessary and important component of the organization's structure. Furthermore, the ST emphasises and amplifies the component elements' interdependence, with all adapting and responding to changes in the political, economic, and social environments in which they function. Similarly, public relations at educational institutions is part of the system that helps to comprehend, build reputation, manage, and sustain the organization's interaction with its publics.

Empirical Review

M. N. Nguru and M. A. Ibrahim (2018) researched "Public Relations and Employee Performance in Nigerian Institutions of Higher Learning." According to this study, the most significant factor in every educational institution has always been and will always be the internal publics, i.e., members of staff – notably managerial personnel. In addition, Ogbu, Silk Ugwu (2019) investigated the implications, problems, and solutions of social media and effective public relations practise in Nigeria. The study discovered, among other things, that the potentials of social media in public relations practise in Nigeria are vast,

and that public relations practitioners who utilise social media are more likely to advance their careers than those who are frightened of using social media. Furthermore, Princewell, Achor N.1, and Vincent, Okoye U. (2013) used a survey research approach to examine the level of Government Public Relations (GPR) and its institutionalisation in government in Nigeria. The findings suggest that GPR practises in Nigeria do not deeply represent the three public relations techniques, or 'tripod mode,' which the researchers identified as the primary index in defining the status of government public relations. As a result of the foregoing, the researchers claim that none of these publications cover or study public relations practice at Edo State University Uzairue, which is the subject of this research.

RESEARCH METHODS

The qualitative research approach was used in the study, with interviews serving as the research instrument. The questions used to elicit replies from the Institution's Public Relations Officer (Edo State University Uzairue) were structured in concert with the Interview schedule, and a face-to-face interview was used to collect data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RQ1: Does Edo State University Uzairue have a functional Public Relations Department?

The findings for the above study question reveal that Edo State University Uzairue has a public relations office housed under the Vice Chancellor's office, rather than a functional public relations department. The response from the Institution's public relations officers also revealed that the public relations office, in collaboration with the other units of the University, does everything possible to ensure that the public perception of the University remains positive at all times, and that information on the University's developmental strides is communicated to the internal and external publics as soon as possible. The implication of the foregoing result is that the Institution still lacks the requisite public relations requirement for a successful public relations endeavour. Furthermore, the findings contrast significantly with the theoretical framework and literature assessment of this paper, which established and explained the benefits of having a functional public relations department. Furthermore, and given the importance of public relations to educational institutions, these findings are not encouraging, despite the fact that data clearly revealed that public relations is performed at Edo State University Uzairue.

RQ2: What is the level of public relations' activities carried out by Edo State University Uzairue?

In addition, the interviewee's answer to the number of public relations operations carried out by Edo State University Uzairue disclosed that the Edo State University Uzairue public relations office carried out various public relations efforts, which the public relations officer acknowledged as the basis for the University's positive image. The findings also assigned a high level of calibration to the University's public relations initiatives. The implication of the aforesaid conclusion is that the University's public relations office carried out or utilised some of the cardinal duties of public relations adduced in this work's literature research. Furthermore, given the collaboration between the public relations office and all of the respective units at the University, the above response kowtows to the systems theory used in the theoretical framework of the research, which highlighted that the component parts of a system can best be understood in the context of their relationships with each other and with other systems, rather than thriving in isolation.

RQ3: What is the extent of the Edo State University Uzairue Public Relations' Practice's Effectiveness?

Furthermore, data obtained from the Edo State University Uzairue public relations office reveals that the level of the public relations practice's efficacy at Edo State University Uzairue is average. Despite the fact that data from the study suggests that Edo State University Uzairue has engaged in a number of public relations efforts. This outcome reveals the ineffectiveness that frequently characterises public relations initiatives that are not channelled, organised, or controlled by a well-structured organisation similar to a PR department.

The implication of the preceding result is that public relations operations conducted outside of their natural environment (Well-structured department, for example) cannot produce successful public relations. According to the researchers, the aforesaid conclusion contradicts the beautiful attributions by scholars on the benefits of public relations in educational institutions, which are captured in the literature part of this work. Furthermore, the outcome detracts from and contradicts the assumptions of the system theory on which the study is based.

CONCLUSION

Based on the data, it is reasonable to conclude that a public relations office exists rather than a Public Relations (PR) department; and that the effectiveness of public relations at Edo State University Uzairue is on the average side. Thus, in light of the foregoing and the enormity of public relations' importance to educational institutions, the researchers recommend that Edo State University Uzairue establish a public relations department with its incendiary compliments; scale up, and also employ effective public relations strategies in order to achieve effectiveness in its public relations campaigns or activities.

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