

TWO

Perceptions of Public Relations

Though largely misconstrued as a magic wand that could turn a decaying situation into a beauty, public relations is practised with great reverence for *truth* and *professionalism*. It is through the pursuit of truth that public relations could gain public confidence and empathy. Organisations are always desirous of relating very well with their various publics in such a way that a mutual relationship built on trust, confidence, quality service and products is established over time.

Public relations is carried out in Nigeria in an atmosphere in which both the profession and the user organisations are going through a learning process of understanding what it is all about. Just as there are practitioners with little experience and no training, so also are organisations with no clear-cut corporate goals and objectives. Thus, there are some business concerns that are so powerful and comfortable in the monopolistic market in the economy, that they only need to advertise occasionally and relate to the public on their own terms. The Peugeot Automobile of Nigeria (PAN) is a good example. PAN may not have seen the need for a comprehensive and sustained public relations campaign until government policies started favouring the importation of second-hand vehicles. After more than two decades of local assembling, it cannot be sure of a vantage position in the

Nigerian automobile market. In most other companies, attempts were made by the corporate bodies to stamp their identity on the minds of the people only in as far as it was necessary to do something and not necessarily because of the inherent need for public relations campaigns.

The Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) manages Nigeria's oil which is the mainstay of the economy. Perhaps people know NNPC as a matter of course for several years. With the acute economic depression and very poor response of government to serious socio-economic problems, the oil industry became threatened with crippling strikes and infrastructural decay. In the past years, we have heard of effective pricing of fuel and the eventual oil price hikes. The abundance of oil resources has not prevented massive importation of the commodity and shortage of the white products – Premium Motor Spirit (PMS), Dual Purpose Kerosene (DPK) and Automotive Gas Oil, Diesel (AGO) – which continue to be a source of worry to the consumers nationwide.

Simply put, the corporation's inability to resolve the fuel crisis for long posed a serious challenge of getting public support and understanding because it is very ironic that Nigerians should lack what they have in abundance. Its ability to make the policy thrust of this sector results in better services commensurate with the performance would determine its future reputation.

The deregulation and oil and gas sector reforms have combined together to reduce the monopoly of NNPC and encourage several other players to participate in the sector thereby encouraging competition and a very high level private investment. The normally complacent and reticent national and multinational oil companies would now have to become more visible promoting themselves rendering better service and work harder in building enduring reputation.

In organisations where it is recognised that public relations is a vital resource to achieving greater heights, necessary backup services, tools for the effective performance of job are rarely

provided. It is common knowledge that some people who function as public relations practitioners are non-professionals. The individuals or organisations that indulge in using non-professionals feel that public relations is a job that could be handled by just anybody, who has 'connection' with the authorities. This is why the press-agents, salesmen, flacks, itinerant stockbrokers, school dropouts and unsuccessful journalists take to the streets under the guise of being public relations practitioners. With people like these, the emerging business class in Nigeria certainly did not take them seriously, and where they were signed on for jobs, they were appropriately treated as glorified messengers and odd-jobs men. Public relations, though a profession that seeks to improve the public perception of its clients has serious image problems. It is constantly beleaguered by the reality of its not really operating as a professional body. Any one who so desires can call himself a public relations consultant and the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations cannot prevent the influx of such unqualified people from becoming members, not to talk of enforcing discipline in line with the Code of Conduct, and the decree that states unambiguously, the standard expected of those who can practise. This has to do with the education, training, experience and character of members.

What is Public Relations?

Public relations is in a state of transition, a rapid transition for that matter. We are forever passing from one order of practice, goals and circumstances into another. The cycles overlap and change is constant. The implications for us is to gear up for these great challenges.

Nobody can say with any certainty how many definitions public relations has. Some say there may be close to a thousand definitions while some others may tell you that they may be as few as ten. This type of confused image identity of a reputable profession is unwholesome. You may take a cue from the many

names of public relations such as public affairs, corporate affairs, public information, corporate relations, issues management, marketing communication, publicity, and many more. Why are there so many names for a single profession? Why are the practitioners reluctant to call public relations its real name – public relations? There are as many books and individuals that have attempted to define the subject. As William Shakespeare said, “What’s in a name?” An American writer once had this to say of public relations:

My name is public relations. But you can call me communications, or you can call me public affairs; or you can call me public information, or corporate relations, or issues management, or publicity or marketing communication.

As we enter the new millennium, public relations as a profession and practice should become better focused and understood for it to accomplish its special coordinating role in corporate governance and the myriad of human and situational relationships.

Admittedly, no one definition may be able to represent the extent of a profession that is as all-encompassing as public relations. This would be chiefly due to the dynamics of time and application. To this extent, definitions have offered refreshing perspectives of public relations. These several definitions notwithstanding, the basics and essence of public relations have continued to be *truth telling, reputation building and credible achievement of goals*.

Public relations has many definitions that attempt to look at it from various perspectives. These definitions are so diverse, and sometimes too simplistic that one would not be surprised that many people are confused and often ignorant of what public relations is all about. Nonetheless, *as professional practitioners*, we cannot afford not to know exactly what our profession is.

Basic Definitions

The following definitions are basic to the practice of public relations and they are self-explanatory. The definition by the International Institute of Public Relations, London, and the update at the 1978 World Forum in Public Relations at Mexico City are good enough as basis for understanding the profession. All the others, such as Rex Harlow's emphasis on various dimensions of the profession may be used as needed.

The definitions are:

- Public relations is the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics.

International Institute of Public Relations, London.

- Public relations practice is the art and social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organisation leaders and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve both the organisation's and the public interest.

Frank W. Wylie (PRSA) & Sam Black (IPRA),

First World Forum in Public Relations, Mexico City, August, 1978

- Public relations is a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organisation and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on, and responsive to, public opinion; defines and emphasises the responsibility of management to serve public interest; helps management to keep abreast of and effectively utilise change; serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound ethical communication techniques as its principal tool.

Rex Harlow in Gold Paper No. 4

January 1990, International Public Relations Association

In addition to these definitions, there is a second category which is termed *third party endorsement*. These are statements that are not couched in definitions but can be regarded as functional explanations of the capabilities and limitations of public relations. These *other definitions* are credited to renowned chief executives of multinational corporations that are reputed to be among the best friends of the profession.

Third Party Endorsement (*Functional Public Relations*)

The following statements are credited to experienced users of public relations methods. These statements are many and varied hence the extended quotes in this section:

- Public relations was once concerned primarily with publicity. It has progressed to a higher plateau, concerned with anticipating the emerging issues, and working with other members of management to create programmes of action which are prompt, effective and enduring. It is also public relations job to communicate our message in a way which wins both understanding and acceptance by demonstrating to the public that our actions are indeed in the public interest.

Richardo John J.
Chairman, Chrysler Corporation

- The way public relations can have the most value is to make it an integral component of the management – that means being in the room when key decisions are made and strategies developed.

Robert H. Hood
President, Douglas Aircraft Company of McDonnads
Douglas Corporation

- Public relations will flourish throughout the free world, wherever competition of ideas, services and products

prevailed. The free world needs societal professionals in adjustment, information and persuasion.

*Edward L. Bernays,
The Later Years Public Relations Insights, 1956 - 1986*

- Public relations serves a wide variety of institutions in the society such as business, trade unions, government agencies, voluntary associations, foundations, hospitals, educational and religious institutions. To achieve their goals, these institutions must develop effective relationships with many different audiences or public communities, shareholders and other institutions, and with the society at large.

Anonymous

- The managements of institutions need to understand the attitudes and values of their publics in order to achieve institutional goals. The goals themselves are shaped by the external environment. The public relations practitioner acts as a counsellor to management, and as a mediator, helping to translate private aims into reasonable, publicly acceptable policy and action.

Public Relations Society of America

- The duties of a public relations practitioner whether he belongs to the staff of a firm or is an independent consultant, are to devise and submit to the firms or organisations employing his services, the means of establishing and maintaining good relations, based on mutual confidence, with the public and keeping it informed of their achievements and, more generally, of all matters relating to their operations. These duties may also be extended to include the relations of firms with their own staff. The public relations practitioner is

responsible for implementing the recommended policy and for measuring result.

French Government Public Relations Decree

- Public relations is a top management function... for corporate planning, for positioning of organisations, monitoring environmental trends and predicting their consequences. It is a tool for internal and external communication, for crisis management, for marketing communication, for the management of good media relations; shareholders and community relations, ... and for good governance.

Mike Okereke, FNIPR

The Challenges of Public Relations, 1993

The Practitioner and Profession Defined

The definitions in the third category are those that deal with the practitioners and the whole idea of what really a profession is. Who are the practitioners and what qualifies them to lay claim to being professionals? What constitutes professionalism? By the time we examine all these factors, we may have begun a deeper and better appreciation of the public relations profession.

To complete the chains of definitions, it may just be well to look at the actors and their profession in terms of how they are perceived.

- The public relations practitioner is the special pleader who seeks to create public acceptance for a particular idea or community.
- The public relations practitioner is an applied social scientist, who advises a principal, client or employer on attitudes and actions to be taken towards the publics on whom viability and fulfilment of the principal's goals depend.

- The public relations counsel is the practitioner, a professional, equipped by education, training and experience to give counsel to client or employer on relations with the publics on which the subject depends.... He finds out the adjustments and maladjustments between the subject and the publics...
- The profession is an art, applied to a science, in which the primary consideration is public interest, not pecuniary motivation.... Other criteria of a profession are educational facilities, a literature, voluntary associations of its members and validation by the state.

Public relations in its generalised sense is ubiquitous to the extent that we live it either as individuals or as corporate bodies. Nobody can really say he does not want public relations (some mistakenly think they have a choice) unless he wants to be an island unto himself. In fact, one needs a measure of public relations to run a family. However, the practice and usage of public relations is uncommon and needs to be learned.

From the preceding definitions, some facts become very obvious. Some of these facts can be summed up thus – ‘relationships’ is the foundation of public relations. All other aspects of the definitions are attempts to establish the interplay of these “relationships.”

Public relations is also housed in several fields of studies such as sociology, law, philosophy, psychology, political science, medicine, architecture and many more. This is why there is a tendency on the part of the authors of some of the definitions to globalise as well as localise their versions. Usually, the definitions state in general terms what public relations aims to achieve – ‘establishment and maintenance of mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics.’

It is after this that the management, social responsibility and any other perspectives are focused upon. The major area of attraction to most people now is management since the

practitioners are desirous of being accorded management status. One should not be surprised in the future if there are medical and engineering definitions of public relations! Rather than surprise, it should be a welcome development.

As practitioners, a general working knowledge and appreciation of the definitions, whether contemporary or functional, is required. The definitions are given depending on the organisation, clientele and the immediate requirement necessitating the definition.

To conclude the survey of the various definitions of public relations, it may be necessary to summarise what has been said so far. The following are the constituents of public relations:

Public Relations

- is a two-way communication.
- is a planned and continuous communication.
- is a management function.
- emphasises reputation building, damage prevention and control.
- cultivates goodwill and mutual understanding.
- analyses trends, events, public opinions and attitudes (research).
- is a strategic counselling function.
- applies to commercial, non-commercial and voluntary organisations.
- demands of companies good citizenship/social responsibility.
- produces tangible and measurable results.
- thrives on truth, honesty and integrity.
- manages issues and crisis.

Of all the definitions that have been identified earlier on, the Mexican statement crafted by Frank Wylie and Sam Black

combines the letters and spirit of the older and newer definitions of public relations. It says:

Public relations practice is the art and social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organisational leaders and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve both the organisation's and public interest.

From this definition, six pertinent issues to public relations can be identified for discussion thus: **Professionalism, research and evaluation, counselling, strategic planning, organisational communication and public interest (ethics)**. Of course there may be other derivatives from the definition but these would just be enough for our present purpose. The following are the highlights of the identified attributes:

Professionalism

- Public relations is an art and social science.
- It has a procedure for licensure and accreditation.
- It is backed by law – with aims and objectives, functions and a code of ethics (Nigeria).
- It provides for continuous learning and knowledge search to guarantee a place atop the corporate ladder.
- Placement of public relations in marketing and journalism departments is obsolete and due for change.

Research and Evaluation

- RACE in public relations is **Research, Action, Communication and Evaluation** and they are synonymous with best public relations practices.
- Public relations is based on a clear understanding of the organisation's or client's past, present and future.
- Research precedes programmes while evaluation comes at the end.

Strategic Planning

- The mark of a professional is the ability to plan well and stay steps ahead of all others.
- As a management function, public relations will help to formulate good policies for employees, shareholders and develop excellent products.
- It manages issues and crisis.
- It develops in-house culture.

Organisational Communication

- Message to all audiences must be – consistent, meaningful to both internal and external audiences – “borderless credibility”.
- Requests for information must be treated expeditiously, cautiously and politely in a clearly defined order of priority.
- The communicator must be patient, open and considerably practical.

Counselling

- As counsellor, the practitioner would advise on ways and means of achieving set corporate goals, good citizenship, employee relations, government liaison and business ethics.
- The public relations management function demands that the practitioner be the eyes, ears and nose of the organisation.
- As counsellor, he sometimes performs “intelligence” service for his employers.

Public Interest

- The practitioner must listen to the community – be “locally global” by working with grassroots organisations and opinion leaders.

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- He must humanise his activities in times of crisis; people matter most.
 - He must lead by example.
 - Accountability and transparency should be the watchword of good public relations practitioners.

The multiple definitions of public relations notwithstanding, the practice would grow as the economy becomes more deregulated, liberalised, commercialised, privatised and diversified. Furthermore, democracy and good governance also create the right environment for the development and growth of the profession. The much awaited sophistication needed in counselling and the adoption of modern communication strategies and tools would become a reality.