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Organising a Public Relations Department

Public relations has become a very strategic department within organisations as it is the hub around which all corporate programmes revolve. There are three main ways in which organisations get the task of public relations accomplished. First, it could be done by establishing a department in-house, second, by engaging the services of consultants and third, a combination of both. The choice an organisation makes would be determined by its type of service, size, target publics and other salient factors. Small establishments often regard a full fledged public relations department as expensive because of the overheads *vis-à-vis* the extent of work to be done. Such organisations prefer the use of consultants for specific public relations programmes or campaigns. On the other hand, big manufacturers, banks, oil companies, construction concerns and government agencies have found the establishment of their own public relations departments more reliable and effective. This is mainly due to the diversity of work to be done and the very elastic publics to which their services and products are directed. In spite of this, such organisations may still have to use public relations consultants, advertisers, and marketers for specific promotional and public enlightenment programmes.

Nomenclature

Public relations is known by many names. Each organisation decides which of the several names suits its fancy. Sometimes, its personnel answer titles that can be misleading as education or health officer. However, its more common variants are information, public information, public affairs, communications, corporate affairs, marketing, advertising, corporate relations and many more. There is a problem in having so many names describing just one profession; public affairs for instance, can be dismissed as that of simply making explanations! It is advisable that public relations should remain the focal point of organisational interaction with its various publics, irrespective of whichever name suits its corporate mood. At least public relations is simple, explicit and expresses the purpose and goal of the profession.

Public Relations Department

The size of the public relations department will depend on the specific functions it is expected to perform. A company with large workload and fairly wide public contacts would require large public relations department. Where this is not the case, a division, a section or even a unit may just be enough. This classification will dictate the staff strength, budget and other relevant issues. In all cases, the public relations department would perform some or all of these functions:

- (a) Counselling management on the best method of achieving a good corporate image.
- (b) Publishing public information leaflets, weekly bulletins, quarterly briefs, annual reports, monthly newsletter, etc.
- (c) Writing articles for national newspapers, magazines and journals when required.
- (d) Coordinating all community relations and social responsibility activities.

- (e) Organising radio, television programmes and effectively liaising with the media.
- (f) Conducting media/opinion research and feedback on the performance of the organisation. ..

In most organisations, inappropriate appointments are made into the public relations departments. This is because of the misconception on the part of employers that all that is required from their public relations executives are extroverts with some education and good looks. Sometimes, a journalistic background is all that is regularly emphasised in advertisement for vacant public relations positions. Whereas a combination of these two criteria and many others would be needed to select an appropriate public relations executive, the present criteria fall short of what the profession demands. Indeed, for anybody to practice public relations successfully, he needs to have purposefully decided to make a career out of it. He would need to acquire the appropriate basic educational training in arts and social science, cumulative experience in reputable media organisations, and definitely serve under superior practitioners, be of very good character, and disposition, fluency in languages, research oriented, resourceful and excellent capacity to lead by example. Of course, continuous education is needed to climb up the corporate ladder. The Nigerian Institute of Public Relations Decree 16 of 1990 is very explicit on these basic qualifications of practitioners. The other attributes are subjective as they may not be easily determined. Nonetheless, a public relations executive needs these stated qualities and many more to make a success of the profession.

A typical public relations department in a big organisation may have about five senior officers with three ancillary staff in order to achieve a cohesive and efficient outfit. In most cases, it is expected that there would be a director, assisted by managers and other senior staff members. Managers would head the various units, such as publications, publicity, audiovisual and protocol.

This categorisation varies from one organisation to another depending on the areas of emphasis (See Fig. 4.1).

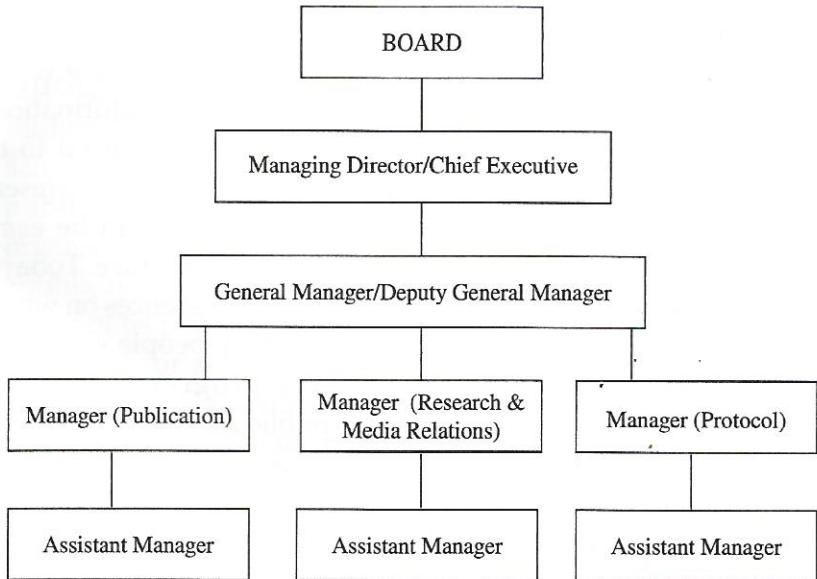


Fig. 4.1: Organogram of a Public Relations Department

Staffing is very crucial to organisations and no effort should be spared in engaging only competent officers who can work with minimal supervision. It is expected that such officers would be creative, innovative, painstaking, widely read, prolific and experienced in handling both material and human resources. The general manager is expected to be a high-flyer. He would have to carry his entire staff along as they project the corporate image of the organisation. To achieve this, such a top professional should be able to inspire and develop his staff in line with his perception and dream of an ideal public relations setting that would aid the achievement of the organisational goals. Furthermore, the public relations department would be expected to evolve effective ways of actualising the policies enunciated by the management but with futuristic touch. The collective commitment to achieving corporate

goals of the organisation is the responsibility of public relations department.

Programme Planning

Public relations is systematic. In a dynamic and changing world that has rendered several scientific and socio-cultural affirmations of years past inaccurate and preposterous, there is need to be guided by the experience and knowledge of the past, present realities and the dreams of the future. This may not be easy, particularly when one attempts to project into the future. Today's and yesterday's events can serve as veritable references on which future actions can be based. Whichever way people engage in this retrospective exercise, effective programming is of tremendous importance for strategic public relations planning.

Campaigns are always preceded by a period of painstaking programme planning which takes the particular nature of the product or service being presented into consideration so that the programme can be successful. It is therefore pertinent to note that programmes are better made for specific purposes and publics, since no two programmes are planned and executed the same way.

In circumstances where same programmes are repeated, the scale, audience, timing, duration, place and other environmental variables may necessitate substantial departure from earlier works. This in effect means that the public relations personnel must work far ahead of his organisation in order to ensure that the planned programme succeeds. However, in planning a public relations campaign, some of the following steps should be considered.

- (a) Constitute interdepartmental committee to plan the programme.
- (b) Choose appropriate theme for the campaign.
- (c) Assign specific tasks to committee members.
- (d) Identify goals and objectives.

- (e) Identify the publics.
- (f) Decide the communication methods for the target audience(s).

Budgeting

Budgeting in public relations is a basic requirement towards achieving successful programming and cost effectiveness. Yet, public relations activities are hardly budgeted for in many organisations. There are usually generous budget provisions for "public relations" which are often committed to programmes that may not be public relations specific. Thus, large sums of money are spent for some inexplicit activities such as gratifications, entertainment, and other mundane things, and lumped together under 'public relations' budget. In the same organisation, there may not be any publication of note; no radio nor television programme and worst still, public relations equipment may be unavailable. Even when some organisations decide to budget for public relations, too much emphasis is placed on the production of diaries, calendars and festivity cards. Although these are needed as public relations tools, yet they should not substitute those programmes that can really help a company achieve its goals. Besides, these require so much money that the real public relations activity of getting adequate information on the organisation to their publics suffers. This happens in organisations where the public relations executives are not sufficiently experienced, and when the management, for some queer reasons, decide to control the budget outside the department. Very clear and purposeful programme planning should now be the hallmark of good public relations. It is imperative that some questions should be asked before any funds are committed for programmes. Do we have the resources to execute the programme? If the answer is in the affirmative, it is necessary to proceed and ask another question: Is the programme in line with the corporate objectives of the organisation? If the

answer is still positive, the public relations manager can now sit down and do a proposal which will put the programme in perspective with the cost implication, to the management. It is always good that the benefit to the organisation is initially discussed with the Chief Executive. Predictably, he may ask: What is our organisation benefiting from this programme? Surely, a good public relations programme would be seen to be well worth its salt by its result in the short, medium and long terms.

One of the problems the public relations manager frequently encounters in getting his budget passed, is the usual complaints by management that it is a parasite on the system. Quite often, the operational staff accuse public relations of taking more than its fair share of the organisation's scarce resources when they cannot even see what has been achieved. This is one dilemma of public relations. Modernity and complex strategic communication tools however enable public relations to have a lot to show for the invested resources. It is no longer invisible even if the result takes time to manifest. This imposes additional responsibility on the public relations executive in his defence of proposals with facts and figures.

It has been recognised that public relations for an organisation does not come cheap just as product promotions, as an important aspect of marketing, constitute a significant percentage of marketing budget. In budgeting for public relations, it is necessary to distinguish between budget undertaken by the in-house public relations unit and the one by the public relations counsellor/consultant. Public relations budgeting done within the organisation by its public relations executive will always exclude the overheads of consultancy charges because the organisation's staff situation has taken care of that aspect. For the consultant, overhead cost, agency commission, apart from others, would form part of the budget. In-house public relations budget would be mainly for the activities to be carried out as given below. The counsellor's final fee would also depend on the extent of work and size of the departmental budget.

Whichever method is employed, certain costs would necessarily be provided for in a public relations budget. These include cost of media space, photography, press relations, video coverage, special events, print and production, entertainment and contingency for unanticipated costs during the period or event.

A typical public relations budget for the inauguration of a new board for an organisation may appear as follows:

Budget for Inauguration of X Board

(a) Pre-inauguration publicity – cards, programme, direct contact, etc.	x	x
(b) Passage expenses for members.	x	x
(c) Accommodation for members/guests	x	x
(d) Venue rental	x	x
(e) Printing of brochure	x	x
(f) Network news coverage (TV, Radio, Newspapers, etc)	x	x
(g) Press coverage/relations	x	x
(h) Transportation	x	x
(i) Photography/video	x	x
(j) Others: banners, rosettes, etc	x	x
(k) Entertainment of guests	x	x
(l) Contingency (10% of the total budget)	x	x
Total	x	xxxxxxx

In large organisations like the United African Company Nigeria (UACN), Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, national and multinational oil companies, banks, manufacturing companies, telecommunication companies, and of late federal

and state governments, the public relations budget is an annual affair, and it is a serious business. The public relations department is usually obliged to present and defend its budget before the appropriate management committee gives approval. It is important for the budget to make provision for externalities such as foreign exchange, inflation and interest rates which if ignored can render the budget ineffective.

The department's budget, which is a detailed document, ties every cost to particular activity and is usually spelt out when that expenditure would be made during the financial year. For instance, the public relations departmental budget for the production of the house journal or any specific item in the budget may be expected to receive the chief executive officer's approval before each of the proposed campaigns or programmes can be executed. In the process, there may be need for the public relations department to make special presentation to the management for its input and final approval. The overall objective of public relations budgeting therefore is to allow management to have a clear idea of its financial commitment and expected corporate gains from a programme. Whether or not a programme will receive management approval is predicated on its relevance to the organisation's set objectives and the ability to fund the programme; as well as the presentation package.

Public relations budgeting and funds voted for it may be a normal procedure in well-established organisations that are buoyant. They are usually capable of generating adequate funds to run extensive and comprehensive campaigns. This, however, is not the case in many organisations, particularly the government agencies. Most times, there is no formal budget for public relations activities. The annual ritual of printing calendars, diaries and cards is based on 'surplus' or contingency funds from other departments. In such instances, the reasons for such publications may not be based on any known public relations imperative other than the fact that it is fashionable to do so or simply that other companies do it. That is why most

organisations' management treat any funds allocated to public relations as unspecific expenditure and which may not be accounted for. The practice in government public relations departments is pathetic as little or no regard is paid to professionalism. When requests for advice are made, it enables the management to often twist facts and give the job to persons as 'complimentary' contracts and the 'successful' ones may not have the competence and capacity to deliver a corporate job. The poor jobs that result are often ignored and when the management wishes to be ironic, the public relations executive would be requested to explain why the job is not of the required standard.

This has led many practitioners in the government service to wonder why they were recruited, only to be sidetracked in matters requiring competent professional counselling. At the end of the day many government agencies may not have any sustained programme of projecting its services and image to its various publics. Indeed, the cost of producing the calendars, diaries and cards could actually have been spread over large and more meaningful programmes to the advantage of the organisation, particularly where funding is usually an excuse for not accepting proper programme budgeting as against arbitrary allocation of funds for commonplace publicity items. Government service, most times, are not profit-oriented, neither do they generate revenue. Promotive activities are therefore affordable luxuries. Budgeting is therefore a culture that public relations department within government and its agencies would have to cultivate, such that its essence of budgeting would be achieved.

In the private sector, it is usually a different story, as the correct attitude to budgeting and programme execution are strictly adhered to and with a lot of freedom given to the professionals. The budget discipline is high, such that extra budgetary requests are simply not allowed. Of course, a profit-oriented company cannot afford to do less. More importantly, the CEOs as well as the management, usually have very clear perception of what public relations is all about and so they allow it to work for the

attainment of their corporate goals, by giving all the support it requires.

Management of Public Relations Department

The management of people, the risk factors, culture, resources, change and technology are challenges which require organisations to start their operations with public relations at the outset. Public relations will achieve the best results when it is taken into consideration at the conceptual, planning and execution stages. More often than not, most organisations remember public relations only when there is crisis. Whenever this happens, it should be considered an aberration, and should be discouraged. This attitude is now changing and the principal as well as the publics are the better for it.

Public relations is a profession in its own right, by virtue of having its own prescribed educational standard, ethics, experience, character, a licensure and accreditation process backed by law (Decree No. 16 of 1990). This in effect, means that anybody who infringes on the law will have the appropriate sanctions imposed. In spite of these very clear attributes of the profession, most employers still do not appreciate what public relations really is. They frequently employ the wrong people to do poorly defined jobs for their organisations. Even Government, one of the biggest employers of public relations practitioners, always hire their chief spokespersons from outside the profession. It is on record that only once has a public relations man been made Nigerian's chief spokesman. As the profession matures, it is hoped that only qualified people are recruited at national and state levels to perform the herculean task of image building and sustenance. When these approximated professionals fail to perform, the profession is often blamed unjustifiably. Public relations has a duty to sanitise the practice and rid it of unqualified members. It should ensure that only the best hands are registered as counsellors and consultants.

Organisations decide on their public relations setup based on

their type of business, extent of work to be done, the information needs of their target publics and many others. While a one-man small-scale business would rather hire the services of a public relations counsellor when needed, big manufacturing companies, government parastatals or large conglomerates would necessarily have a public relations department, or unit. It is not uncommon to find organisations hiring services of counsellors/consultants to complement the work of the in-house staff, especially in fledging groups or for specialised public awareness programmes.

The public relations department may exhibit the following characteristics:

- (a) The public relations executive shall normally report directly to the chief executive of the organisation. This situation may vary according to the preference of the CEO and or the governing board of directors.
- (b) The public relations executive shall be a counsellor to the organisation on major policy issues, at the point of conceptualisation, up to actualisation of programmes.
- (c) He shall ensure effective communication among all the staff of the organisation, from management to other staff and vice versa.
- (d) He relates in the areas of facilitating free flow of information among workers, peers and executives. He encourages dialogue, counselling, discussion and consultation as means of solving problems; promotes formal and informal interaction between all categories of staff while still ensuring the hierarchical structure.
- (e) He shall avoid employers' claim that they want performance but end up paying for attendance; motivate staff through encouraging favourable policies for security, satisfaction, good reward system and welfare.

- (f) He shall have short-term, medium-term and long-term programme objectives.
- (g) Ideally, crisis should be anticipated and prevented through effective coordination of all the organisation's activities. However, unforeseen crisis is bound to occur at one time or the other – the contingency plans made ahead of time should be put to work.
- (h) Ensure effective media liaison such that there is mutual understanding between the organisation and the media in terms of news requirement and proper presentation of facts to the public.

These and many other issues are important in recognising an ideal public relations department. The public relations functionaries from this presentation are clearly the most strategic executives in an organisation, provided they are research-oriented, profound in thought and proficient in handling management and other related issues.

Public Relations Functions

Organisational operations have assumed modern and dynamic proportions that competition, and market forces have become more relevant in normal business environment. The erstwhile economic principles and philosophies that remained reference points for many decades have suddenly become invalidated with new concepts which seemed far-fetched but now becoming the order of the day. If public relations three decades ago was a fancy in Nigeria, it is no longer so, as several organisations have sprung up under the new economic dispensation, creating room for very keen and healthy competition for the attention of their various publics.

Given that many organisations offer similar services, perform at about the same level, experience constraints, target the same limited publics that have several things in common, it is apparent

that something else other than these regular features must come in handy to distinguish one entity from the other. That other "factor" in many cases has always been the corporate image the organisations project to its publics. The corporate image is an embodiment of all those factors that mark out an organisation from the others. Examples are its logo, style, products and services. The logo, particularly, has the capacity to make definite and lasting statements on the mission of an organisation than what several thousand of words can achieve, for example, a flying elephant for an airline! How ironic. Does an elephant actually fly? No wonder, Nigeria Airways finally collapsed.

From a monopolistic economy characterised by government regulations, Nigeria has come a long way to be a partially deregulated, commercialised and privatised market economy. All these developments only serve to accentuate the need for packaging as well as allowing greater emphasis on service and productivity. Where the personnel, finance and administration office duties are clearly defined, the same cannot be said of the public relations. In many cases, the duties are so expansive and imprecise that he could appear as a floating officer. The reporting line is also a subject of controversy as many forces within the organisation resent the direct access, the public relations executive has to the CEO. Several hurdles and bureaucratic encumbrances are introduced to undermine public relations work and many non-professionals take on the various functions under different guises in order to achieve this. The situation shows no sign of abating until practitioners become highly qualified professionals and enjoy positive support of the chief executives in articulating the corporate direction, philosophy and priorities of their organisation. Thus, the reputation of an organisation/group with its various publics would depend on what is seen of their activities. It is only when the public relations executive is given the opportunity of participating in decision-making and execution that he can meaningfully project and defend the interest of his establishment. The effective harnessing of ideas, policy

formulation and execution, and evaluation holds the ace in modern day complex business management. Programme evaluation is an area where public relations would prove most useful to the management as a veritable source of feedback mechanism as the practice improves.

The functions of public relations personnel can, therefore, be seen from the perspective of organisational counselling, reputation building, media relations, social responsibility and information processing. The following are some of the specific functions of public relations personnel in organisations:

- (a) participate actively in generating ideas, formulating policies, programme execution, programme evaluation and impact studies, and advise management on public relations implications of its policies, and the effects of its products/services internally and externally;
- (b) keep the general public informed of the philosophy, aims, objectives, policies and goals of the organisation, as well as the products and services rendered in order that the understanding and cooperation of their various publics might be secured;
- (c) perform intelligence functions of feeling the pulse of public opinion in relation to its services and products in order to serve as feedback to the management through collation and analysis of relevant data;
- (d) assist various cadres of staff within the various departments, through active collaboration and coordination of the basic tenets of public relations needed in the day-to-day interaction with the public;
- (e) organise in-house talks, seminars, workshops and round-table discussions between staff and management for the effective communication skills in a result-oriented management;
- (f) publish newsletters, bulletins, annual reports, spot

- publication on achievements, conference proceedings and other designated publications that would positively project the image of the organisation;
- (g) arrange press conferences, event coverage, open days, press monitoring, press relations, and facility visits for the media;
 - (h) advise the organisation on viable and socially relevant community programmes to be embarked upon as part of its social responsibility duties;
 - (i) participate meaningfully in all efforts that would enhance productivity, increase income and allow general growth;
 - (j) provide effective internal communication by making public opinion survey results, media comments/print media clippings, reports and other intelligence information available to departmental executives;
 - (k) clear all publications, news stories and information that concern particular departments with the departmental heads before sending them to the press;
 - (l) maintain an information bank on every aspect of the organisation's operation that should be adequately stored and could be retrieved within the shortest possible time when needed; and
 - (m) plan and execute all public relations related campaigns and programmes of the organisation to win more friends.

In doing all these, there is need to ensure that adequate consultation and consensus are reached before going public on any issue, in order to avoid the near impossible task of retrieving news once it is published. Most professionals in business organisations view public relations personnel as "spenders" rather

than “bakers” because of the large funds expended on what they consider as “mere” noise-making. As erroneous and misleading as this view may be, it has its merit in that it only calls for the total commitment of the public relations operatives to the full realisation of the aims and objectives of the organisation they serve. Nonetheless, business without public relations is a dead end because the ‘public’ is the business.

Myths such as the generalised assumption that public relations must be practised at the management level and report directly to the chief executive officer (CEO) is the goal but requires hardwork on the part of the practitioners. Their status, qualifications and experience also count. The erroneous view that the CEO is the chief image-maker of the organisation should not be taken to mean usurping the job of the professional. At best, he is only expected to show more than passing interest. He should support public relations unit financially, give training exposures and provide needed infrastructures.

The above roles are by far not exhaustive of what modern public relations seeks to achieve. Therefore, PR executives should break new grounds and create strategies which will be of benefit to their organisations.