

to the life of our government as is the heart to the human body ... if that heart be weakened, the result is debilitation; if it be stilled, the result is death.” [Justice Black].

In case you think I am making a one-sided case, Otto clarifies that no excuse is good enough for a shackled and harassed press.

In my mind and perhaps in yours, the press can never be good enough. But its freedom is not and should not be dependent on its job evaluation. Its freedom gives it the right to be incompetent. To be irresponsible. To make mistakes.

The Nigerian press, in out of autocratic and democratic governments have performed admirably well. However, with colonialism and ‘militacracy’ behind us, the journalism of adversary that has been practised and used to keep the country down, should now be discarded so that together the new focus should be on development journalism and a socially responsible media management. The whole world is watching how we manage this new paradigm shift.

Listening to the Community

In this age and time, effective communication has to be “locally global”. Well, this simply means that professional communicators require meaningful alliances with grassroots organisations and opinion leaders which serve as third-party endorsement that boosts and makes our messages more credible. Notwithstanding the type of hi-tech that we must relate to, the good old-fashioned face-to-face communication would continue to be relevant in our cultural milieu. Let me expansively quote Richard J. Kelso (1995) on the impact of relationships with the community:

... I wanted a face-to-face meeting with union leadership ... We built a bridge of trust and we both travelled over that bridge a lot of times in the years that followed. We set up grassroots groups of about one hundred employers, with each person assigned to monitor one of the local government units in our service area. When a town council met, we were there — listening. Everyone knew we were there and who our people were. But they also knew our people were empowered to come back and make

recommendations. We nipped all kinds of problems in the bud. We headed off a lot of expensive issues because we built relationships. Over time, people came to realise we had a great deal more in common than we had to separate us. This isn't complicated. It's just common sense approaches to people. And that starts with listening.

Public relations encourages listening to our audiences for feedback as well as increasing the impact of the messages in view of the information overload that people now have to contend with. The way messages are packed for the elites and decisions makers with care is what is required for the disparate audiences in the rural and semi-urban areas of our communities.

Continuous Education

The illiterate of the future are not those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn. The public relations profession is very intellectual in design and all practitioners should embrace these reality.

— *Alvin Toffler*

The profession of public relations in Nigeria will not go far enough unless it devises a way of ensuring that all accredited members and counsellors go through a "fairly rigorous course of study in the field" and deliberate programme of mentoring. Today the "untrained pros" are doing much better than the real professionals in terms of job patronage and financial rewards. It is time to introduce new conditions into the membership requirement such as "internship and project writing" to the existing rules. For the hundreds of people who came in when there was no rigid standard, they would need specially designed refresher courses with emphasis on practicals or their movement up the ladder is determined at a point. For all professional members, there is need for a mandatory "Public Relations Continuous Education Programme". It is through such knowledge-renewal programmes that the public relations counsellors can be groomed for the challenges of management and policy making at the highest level of the organisations they serve.

Specialisation

Practitioners to succeed would be generalists and specialists, in as much as your organisations are concerned. Narrow schedule can be suffocating. In this respect, public relations practitioners are advised to specialise in such areas as government relations, investor relations, employee relations, community relations, in manufacturing industries, banking and finance, entertainment, social reporting service-oriented agencies and non-governmental organisations. A public relations person in present-day Nigeria is usually expected to handle all sorts of issues emanating in the course of the business of his employer (or client) and the various departments in the organisation concerned as well as any other such callings that require effective social linkages. The present spate of deregulation, commercialisation, privatisation, mergers and acquisitions, and acute economic depression, clearly calls for practitioners to possess specialised expertise in the particular area at issue.

To accomplish these tasks, the public relations persons should know what tools and strategies to use. They would be expected to have basic communications skills in attitude formation, constituents of public opinion, media operations, research, evaluation and effective writing skills.

Practitioners should continue to act as champions and agents of constructive change; giving advises on complex issues such as duties of the chief executive, scope of organisation's business, the corporate culture, and values. Of course, the basic duties of answering reporters enquiries, creating corporate advertisements, writing annual reports, publishing in-house journals and developing employee communication programmes remain necessary components of specialisation in whatever perspective we may choose to look at it.

Illusions

Public relations as a profession has its own peculiarities and foibles. Two of such peculiarities include the mistaken view by the chief executives/government officials that their image is greater than that of the organisation and that since they are regarded as the chief image makers, then they can substitute themselves for the professionals. First, the CEO sees the public relations manager primary responsibility as

that of buoying up his social standing even when it does not bear any relationship with the corporate objectives of the organisation. Any surprise that public relations managers take on negative names such as 'spin doctors' and 'image launderers'.

Polishing the ego of an individual is certainly much easier than counselling, building and managing the reputation of an organisation. Managing the corporate interests of the organisation, its employee, shareholders, investors, customer relations and relationship with government and other agencies are by far more challenging, edifying and professional than thinking of how to keep an importunate sit-tight chief executive in office. These illusions are due for the trash can and the public relations executives should re-direct their energies to the achievement of the corporate goals of their organisation. Whenever the chief executive's focus is on the attainment of the organisational goals, then the task of the spokesperson is made easier and success would be guaranteed.

Performance

In public relations, the best method of building a good reputation is by sticking to the corporate objectives of the organisation and doing a good job. Many organisations that have neglected their primary duties to fraternise with the media with the hope that publicity would earn them respect and public visibility have always found, to their chagrin, that it is counter-productive in the medium and long-term. Relationship between the media and public relations is such that organisations spokespeople have tended to be over-dependent on the media. Yet, the journalists have a lot of complaints on the operational methods and the quality of service rendered to them and even to the public by the practitioners. Grunig's counsel is instructive while practitioners redouble their effort to improve on the standard of practice. He affirms:

Excellent public relations needs the media less than does poor public relations and as organisations depend less on the media, the better their relationship with the media will become.

Colleagues, if your organisation can focus its attention on corporate performance and achievement, the media will believe and trust you the more.

Technology

In the new world we are in, economic and political advantages come through technology. As public relations practitioners, we should encourage our clients, employers and critical public to go global by latching on to the Information Superhighway of the Internet, Computers, E-Mail, Teleconferencing, Televideo, Voice Mail, Fax, Beepers, Mobile Phones and many others. When computer came, many people believed it would create unemployment. Today, manual scripting is old fashioned and unproductive. Computer and other modern facilities such as the phone are handy tools for greater efficiency and productivity. Do not be afraid, use them and you would be on the way to becoming a better professional.

Community Relations and Social Responsibility

We have seen how the corporate world have been hard hit because of their abysmal failure to recognise their responsibility to their immediate environment and people. They place their bottom-line above the people. These corporate bodies beat their chests that they have performed wonderfully and sometimes claim they are alternative governments to the communities where they are operating and that the community people are simply unappreciative and too demanding. Whatever yardstick you may want to use, they have simply been doling peanuts to the affected people as their operations makes any other type of existence other than dependency virtually impossible. The oil companies in the Niger-Delta, the most affected have a long way to go as it is their business to fashion out how the people in those environments survive. Greater humanisation of their actions is needed in terms of their operations and relationship with their host communities. The corporate bodies affected (oil industry for example) should avoid politics and be dynamic in their response to issues — it is not enough to say “it is not in the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)” but meaningfully involve the community in deciding what they require.

A community in Bayelsa State, Akasa, has a symbiotic relationship with Stat Oil which took the trouble to relate correctly with the community. They simply asked them, “what do you want?” and what they wanted was done even before they started exploration

work. Today, it is a shining example of corporate social responsibility as the company and the people relate with mutual respect. If these big multinational companies can lift the people above the poverty level to live a decent life, the people would be grateful and become defenders of such organisations.

What are the implications of the evolving corporate strategies? Public relations practitioners would need to specialise in certain key areas they can comfortably excel and become an authority in social reporting, a transparent process of listening and constructively responding to the concerns of stakeholders of any business concern that its operations may impact significantly on the environment its people is one of the new areas to be considered. As the big consultancies are making good business, so will the medium-sized ones and the small outfits have their share of the market.

Job Guarantee?

Our jobs are on the line. We must begin to seek new ways of doing things better and more efficiently with probably fewer resources. Organisations are restructuring and redefining their operational strategies in view of the happenings around the world. The first casualty in such downsizing, rightsizing, reengineering, streamlining, outsourcing, reinventing, process improvement exercises are service departments where public relations mostly belong. The message here is that the cost of public relations will continue to rise and more employers will seek ways of bringing this down. One sure way they would explore in the future is "outsourcing". This is a new development whereby corporate bodies maintain small public relations units for in-house routines and employee related communications. For special events and specialised programmes, they would hire the best niche practitioner on single contract terms and that is all. The implications of this evolving corporate strategies is that public relations practitioners would need to specialise in certain key areas they can comfortably excel and become an authority in the area. As the big consultancies are making good business, so will the medium-sized ones and the small outfits have their share of the market.

Conclusion

The government continues to be the greatest employer of public

relations practitioners, yet, it has not been able to harness the expertise of these professional in the business of governance though this may be due to some misconceptions and breakdown in communication. Whatever may be the problem, there is need for the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations at the national level to consciously mid-wife the needed collaborative work that is required for a better and more sustainable management of the country. The private sector having commenced its restructuring programmes for many years is clearly ahead in its use of public relations experts to achieve goals and target in an era in which competition is the order the day. The public sector, as it democratises and carries out its reform programmes in all aspects of the economy particularly in the downstream oil sector, banking, public service, and the anti-corruption war, would be more competitive if the best practice of public relations be adopted.

References

- Adamolekun, Wole (1996). "The Information Superhighway and Traditional Communication: Where We Stand." *Africa Media Review* Vol.10 No 2. African Council for Communication Education, Nairobi Kenya.
- Adamolekun, Wole and Ekundayo, Tayo. *Interactive Public Relations*. Taymos & Taymos Communications, Lagos. (unpublished).
- Badaracco, H. Claire (1996). "Public Opinion and Corporate Expression: In Search of The Common Good." P. 14, *Public Relations Quarterly*, Fall 1996, Vol. 41 No.3. Rhinebeck, N.Y.
- Black, Sam (1993) *The Essentials of Public Relations*, Kogan Page Limited, London.
- Bernays, L. Edwards (1986). "The Later Years" — *Public Relations Insights [1956 - 1986]* H & M Publishers, Rhinebeck N.Y.
- Crooke, A. Robert (1996). "How The Cult of Cost Efficiency Destroys Credible Communications." p.8 *Public Relations Quarterly*, Fall 1996, Vol. 41. No 3. Rhinebeck, N.Y.

- Dom, A. James (1995). "The Rise of Government — The Decline of Morality." *Vital Speeches of the Day*, October 1995 p.10. Mount Pleasant, S. C.
- Drobis, David R. (1997). "Boderless Believability — Building Trust Around The World." *Vital Speeches of The Day*, February 1997, p.281 Mount Pleasant.
- Fisher, Donna (1996). "People Power: 12 Power Principles to Enrich Your Business, Career and Personal Networks." Book Review by Paul Swift. *Public Relations Quarterly*, Spring 1996, Vol.41 No.1. Rhinebeck, N.Y.
- Haas, Robert D. (1994). "Ethics — A Global Business Challenge-Character and Courage." *Vital Speeches of the Day*, June 1994 p.506. Mount Pleasant, S.C.
- Howard, M. Carole (1995). "Building Cathedrals — Reflections On Three Decade In Corporate PR and A Peek At The Future." *Public Relations Quarterly* Summer 1995, Vol.40. No. 2, Rehincbeck, N. Y.
- Luis, Morales (1996). "A Major Public Relations Issue — Favour Positive Themes." *Vital Speeches of The Day*, July 1996. p. 602, Mount Pleasant, S.C.
- Maduka, Mwabueze (1997). "Vision 2010: Nigeria's Ladder to Development." *The Nigerian Accountant*, April/June 1997. Vol.30 No.2 Lagos.
- McDonnell, John F. (1994). "The Lighthouse Effect. In Helping Others and Achieving Better Results." *Vital Speeches Of The Day*, p. 506. November 1994, 82. Mount Pleasant, S.C.
- Nwosu, E. Ikechukwu (1997). "Public Relations Vs Propaganda" *Public Relations Digest*, Volume 4. Lagoon Centre for Public Relations, Lagos.
- Osuntokun, Akinjide (1997). "Marching In Tanden With The World." *Nigerian Tribune*, September, 1997. P. 26.
- Otto, Charlotte R. (1997). "1-800 Future — What To Do When Tommorrow's Consumers Call. *Vital Speeches of The Day*, June 1997, p.523,Mount Pleasant S.C. Pleasant. SC.

- Peterson, Susan (1995). "Managing Your Communication: The Year 2000 and Beyond" *Vital Speeches of The Day*, July, 1995. P. 188 Mount Pleasant . S.C.
- Seitel, Fraser P. (1992). "Public Relations In The Year 2000 — Prospering In Its Practice." *Vital Speeches of The Day*, December 1992. P. 157 Mount Pleasant S.C.
- Shonekan, Ernest (1992) "Nigerian's Economic and Political Image" in *Public Relations Digest*, Lagoon Centre for Public Relations.
- Thomson, Steven R (1997). "Public Relations In The New Millennium: Understanding The Forces That Are Shaping The Profession." *Public Relations Quarterly*, Spring 1997, Vol.42 No. 1. Rhinebeck, N.Y.
- Triwaks, Moshe (1995). "Communication Explosion: The Israeli Experience." *8th Sam Epelle Memorial Gold Paper*, Lagos.
- Turner, Mike (1997). "UK Investors List Drawbacks..." Lead News Story in *The Guardian* of September 23, 1997.
- White, Don (1991). *How to Manage Public Relations*, Business Books Limited.