

THREE

PUBLIC RELATIONS AS A MANAGEMENT FUNCTION

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Public relations has begun a new and compelling journey of rediscovery. This is because of the new democratic setting and the economic openness unknown to most Nigerians in the military era of command and control method of governance which has changed to that of communication, co-operation, involvement and the promotion of truth and transparency. More than ever before, organisations would now have the onerous task of accounting to their various constituencies either as taxpayers, customers, consumers and even observers.

As we enter the much talked-about millennium, it is useful to look back and check the prevalent situation of the period *vis a vis* the changes that have continued to dominate all spheres of our lives in the area of Information Technology, Computers, Internet (Information Superhighway), Cyberspace, Telecommunication, Medicine, Air Transportation, Space Exploration and many more. Democracy is the new singsong; the Cold War has ended and the Berlin Wall has fallen. Many things that were believed to be inconceivable have come to pass. Indeed, the world has achieved and surpassed the dreams of the proponents of the global village and in the years ahead all the remaining artificial barriers created by man would disappear.

At the end of this discussion on the claims of management to the functions of public relations, each participant should be able to appreciate and fit in properly into this new mode. The objectives of this paper are, to:

- (i) facilitate a better understanding of the critical functions of public relations practitioners in organisational communications within and outside;

- (ii) recognise the limitations of such communications when the issue of management and performance are at stake. Management is an area that many practitioners are yet to internalise as key to their functions;
- (iii) motivate participants to serve as protagonists of effective communication by encouraging the two-way symmetrical communication as a standard of operation in the workplaces; and
- (iv) encourage public relations practitioners to shed off the garb of technicians, tacticians and “spin doctors” and use management methods to put content and quality into their tasks.

Public Relations as a Management Function

The fad in public relations circles is to assert that public relations is a management function. Also, practitioners bask in the euphoria that they report directly to the chief executive. To complicate matters, practitioners have virtually abdicated their responsibilities to their CEOs by overemphasising that their CEOs are the chief image makers of their organisations. The CEOs, on the other hand, have taken the ‘honour’ to be absolute and thus play the role of public relations to the exclusion of the practitioners. These are the reasons why there is need to refocus the attention of practitioners so as to understand and appreciate their roles better and therefore achieve better results. Here are some definitions that specifically allude to **management** for our consideration.

Public Relations is a management function of a continuing and planned character, through which public and private organisations and institutions seek to win and retain the understanding, sympathy and support of those with whom they are or may be concerned by evaluating public opinions about themselves in order to correlate as far as possible, their own policies and procedures to achieve by planned and widespread information, more productive co-operation and more efficient fulfillment of their common interest.

*- International Public Relations Association in The Hague:
May 1960. Adebayo O, (1992)*

Public Relations is the management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an organisation with the public interest and executes a programme of action to earn public understanding and acceptance.

- *John Marston, The Nature of Public Relations*
Adebayo O, (1992)

Public Relations is a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and co-operation between an organisation and its public; it 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

Public Relations Duties

Organisations that have recorded successes over the years are those that incorporated communications with all their programmes from the beginning. The corporate reputation of an organisation is a joint responsibility of all its employees. Thus, it becomes the duty of the Corporate Affairs Unit to provide leadership in the area of internal and external communications.

The unit has the responsibility of ensuring employer/employee relationship in terms of a two-way symmetrical information flow, explanation of management policies, welfare and social relationships. For example, the unit could broaden the scope of information sharing through the introduction of Staff Parley, Suggestion Box and Open House Meetings. Even the mode of receiving visitors at the gate, reception room and telephone behaviour contributes a lot to an organisation's corporate image. In fact, these frontline staff are the first contacts with the office and the first impressions they make, lasts. The Corporate Affairs Unit would have to attempt to polish these first contact points and sustain a training and counselling programme for

them. The work scope of the Public Relations Unit, though very wide, could be distilled thus:

- Assisting the Board and Management in formulating good policies for the achievement of the corporate objectives.
- Explaining and communicating management policies to the internal and external public of the Board.
- Monitoring and co-ordinating all official engagements of the Board, and serving as the main link between the Board and its various public.
- Organising and sustaining an effective internal and external publicity and positive image for the organisation.
- Initiating and supervising the preparation and publication of Handbooks, Operational Guidelines, Annual Reports, Newsletter, Diaries and Calendars, Hand Bills, Posters and other publications.
- Production of jingles for television, radio, films, pictures and slides.
- Overseeing all protocol duties including reception from the gate and telephone reception. To be responsible for the proper conduct of affairs during special visits and tours and to write reports on same.
- Liaising with critical institutions that relate operationally with it. This is to ensure a smooth relationship and for exchange of information.
- Co-ordinate communication with international organisations and governments.

As a management function, Public Relations encompasses the following:

1. Anticipating, analysing and interpreting public opinion, attitudes and issues which might impact, for good or ill, the operations and plans of the organisation.
2. Counselling management at all levels in the organisation with regard to policy decisions, courses of action and communication, taking into account their public ramifications and the organisation's social or citizenship responsibilities.
3. Researching, conducting and evaluating on a continual basis, programmes of action and communication to achieve informed

public understanding necessary to the success of an organisation's aims. These may include marketing, financing, fund raising, employee, community or government relations and other programmes.

4. Planning and implementing the organisation's efforts to influence or change public policy.
5. Setting objectives, planning, budgeting, recruiting and training staff, developing facilities and managing the resources needed to perform all of the above. Examples of the knowledge that may be required in the professional practice of public relations include communication arts, psychology, sociology, political science, economics and the principles of management and ethics. Technical knowledge and skills are required for opinion research, public issues analysis, media relations, direct mail, institutional advertising, publications, film/video productions, special events, speeches and presentations.

In helping to define and implement policy, the public relations practitioner utilises a variety of professional communication skills and plays an integrative role both within the organisation and between the organisation and the external environment.

As organisations refocus to become razor-sharp in their perceived areas of national preference, the negative sides are de-emphasised and eliminated where possible. The consolidation period has necessitated restructuring, downsizing and realignment of the banks, the work force and all the supporting structures of the system. The changes in the financial sector are downright unprecedented and the response of the Board is just normal. Any of the processes, if mishandled or improperly communicated, could have significant negative impacts on the organisation's financial performance, reputation and relationship with other economic actors in the same business.

The way we analyse and project our practice today should reflect the future circumstance and status of public relations in Nigeria. The best years for public relations are yet to come. This will happen only if we, as practitioners, hold fast to professionalism by developing appropriate communication knowledge and skills that would make us true leaders in our organisations and communities.

Public relations processes are adopted in a haphazard and inconsistent manner where they exist and in some cases, they simply are non-existent. Too often, decisions are made without our input and when there is a backlash, we are requested to resolve them in favour of our organisations. It is even more disheartening when it is realised that most organisations are comfortable with decisions that are made at middle management or lower levels. Individuals that do not have the requisite knowledge and information on the organisation and its boundary audiences usually take such decisions. Of course, the refrain that the chief executive officer is the chief image maker has meant for many of them a total takeover of public relations schedule. The fact that they are mostly non-professionals makes this a fallacy. Maybe the practitioners should be more explicit in making the CEOs recognise that it is more of a honorary nomenclature than executive — the public relations officer remains the person that is specialised.

The result is fire-fighting and guerrilla-type public relations approach to an otherwise simple manageable situation.

The Millennium Public Relations Practitioners

Chief executives of leading-edge companies and indeed government corporations, as a management function, would accept public relations with the counselling skills playing an important role just as that of communication. During this period, there would be a gradual evolution of practitioners from being information communicators to that of counsellors such that their place at the management level would be guaranteed. Public relations practitioners would be expected to set the agenda for their organisations, champion them and be agents of constructive change, and advice on the organisation's business and corporate culture. In addition, an understanding of the organisation's business strategies, marketing plans, internal challenges and future opportunities. All these require some level of intellectual competence to make an impact.

An organisation has no choice whether to "have" public relations. All organisations are communicating with all audiences that are of importance to them. The decision is not whether to have public relations, but whether these relations will be handled in a planned, organised manner ... or allowed to be accidental, haphazard and possibly inconsistent.

- Dyer Samuel

Public relations in the third millennium will not be anything like what we have ever known. It will follow the new era of communication explosion as public relations has in developed economies, where it has grown and flourished, especially in America. For us, our public relations cannot outrun our economic, social and political systems. What public relations would be at the turn of the century would depend on how quickly the society moves in critical direction of modernising and globalising the economy and the institution of a free society where the individuals would be encouraged to give his best to humanity. Since we will have to interact with the developed economies, then there is need to make deliberate efforts to learn what it takes to succeed in the world of modern communications. Public relations practitioners in the new era will have to be steps ahead of their immediate environment because they would be expected to show the way, the limitations around them notwithstanding. Furthermore, practitioners would be expected to:

Support business objectives, explain policies, increase awareness, focus attention on issues, encourage informed discussion, help to change perception, opinion and behaviour, influence attitudes, motivate staff, reinforce the marketing and sales effort, build and sustain "reputation" over time, help to restore "credibility", have some effect on the values of a particular group or of society as a whole

These strategies were prescribed by Norman Stone (1995) for small businesses, but really, we can use these strategies for any public relations situation.

The millennium public relations professional would require many skills to confront the challenges of a rapidly changing world. The following are some of the areas that require attention for a successful career:

Total Quality Management and Leadership

Public relations as it is presently practised has a preponderance of tacticians and technicians, thus earning for themselves the unenviable accolade of "spin doctors". Increasingly, practitioners would have to imbibe the best practices of management to make the difference and

truly become the point men in their organisations. The following view expressed by a management specialist is worth noting: On quality, Max DePree in *Leadership is an Art* has this to say:

When we talk about quality, we are not only talking about the quality of product and service. But we are also talking about the quality of our relationships and the quality of our communications and the quality of our promises to each other. And so, it is reasonable to think about quality in terms of truth and integrity.

Total quality management for public relations must of necessity include leadership and managing with facts. This way, public relations would achieve greater results.

Professionalism

Many accredited practitioners in Nigeria today are neither educationally nor by experience qualified to practise public relations. Furthermore, despite all the complaints by the Institute about unqualified, ill-equipped and recalcitrant members who would rather discountenance the rules and regulations governing the practice of the profession, nobody has been debarred for violating the ethics of the profession.

Public relations is based on truth. As professionals, we are enjoined never to lie. Chief executives and their companies, government and the civil society are expected to tell the truth. We all know how, as practitioners, we constantly cave in at our employers instance to deceive the public by declaring profits not earned and promoting products that we would rather not use. Practitioners have consistently seen governance and politics as a "no-go area".

What roles has the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations played in the unfolding political debacle we suddenly found ourselves in since the last political imbroglio in 1993? Notwithstanding the fact that the government prefers working with foreign experts and local non-professional public relations practitioners, it is our responsibility to counsel our leaders to uphold the truth and do what is right.

An adjunct to this aspect of professionalism is the plethora of people that now parade the streets as public relations consultants. Perhaps I should just say that I have not yet seen any public relations

consultant of serious reckoning. Most consultants are torn between advert collectors, trade fair organisers, publicists, press agency and outright traders.

Suffice to say that public relations consultants should plan to put on the real garb of the calling they have chosen — that of pontificating and fashioning a future for their client. They are to inject the element of research and evaluation into the services of their clients such that their past, present and future are in constant focus for the achievement of the organisation's corporate goals. They would be expected to know how government's fiscal and economic policies impinge on their client's businesses and, where necessary, make decisive moves to positively influence the enactment of such statutes.

As professionals, therefore, we must aspire to be knowledgeable, attentive, persuasive and honest in our relations with clients and target audiences. We must use our understanding of our client's business, in order to provide them with creative, thoughtful, and valuable professional services. A public relations person, who specialises in telling his employer/clients what they like to hear will soon lead the company to unmitigated disaster from which they may never recover.

Specialisation

Public relations has a problem of perception. Different people see public relations from various perspectives to the extent that its most important point of reference, the name, is as varied as one can imagine. Public relations is being referred to as communications, public affairs, public information, corporate affairs, issues management, publicity or marketing, employee relations and many more. Nonetheless, practitioners can neither afford to be generalists nor specialists. We must aspire to do a balancing act by being both generalists and specialists, in as much as our organisations are concerned. In this respect, public relations practitioners are advised to specialise in such areas as government relations, investor relations, employee relations and community relations, in manufacturing industries, banking and finance, entertainment, 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) be they in specialised businesses as architecture, engineering, medicine, law or any other calling that requires effective social linkages in general fields. 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 communication skills in attitude formation, constituents of public opinion, media operations, research, evaluation and an effective writing skill.

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

Modernisation

The Information Superhighway, a border-free web of communication and information networks, has surely left Nigeria in the sideline as a mere observer. Thus, the internet, electronic mail, television and video conferencing, video phones, VTV (i-glasses) are yet to be fully part of our communication system. The awesome internet for example is a global web of more than thirty thousand computer networks worldwide connecting more than thirty-two million people in seventy different countries. It was an experiment that first took place when Neil Armstrong walked on the moon (Appolo 11) about three decades ago. In Nigeria, our attempt to computerize and embrace modern telecommunication systems such as voice mail, pagers, cellular phones, cable television, fax and many others have been bogged down by inefficient social infrastructure such as electricity, coupled with the financial wherewithal. Yet, we must not allow all these encumbrances to deter us since we cannot afford to be static while remaining poor imitators and spectators to the end of time. To start with, many of us

here cannot type, not to talk of using the computer. In the new era, a public relations person should not only be aware of the existence of these communication tools, he ought to know how to interact with them to aid his job performance.

The radio and television still remains the more accessible media of communication that people are exposed to. A research study has revealed that there are about one billion radio sets in the world — an average of one set for every five people on earth. However, television figures in any study can never match these figures nor be as transportable or versatile as the radio. The big disadvantage of these modern communication tools is the pervasive influence they ultimately have on the children population, who are innocently enthralled and addicted to some of them. For example, a lot of us here have met the uncontrollable transmission of offensive programmes on the internet such as pornography and wanton violence which can negatively affect the psyche of the children. An Israeli expert recently computed “that at three hours a day, by the time a child is seventy, he would have spent more or less than seven years of his life watching television”. Therefore, as public relations practitioners, we have a duty to encourage our employers and clients to adopt new technologies, after due evaluation of the “advantages and disadvantages of each technology and use each one appropriately and strategically”.

Ethics

Bernays (1986) it was who said “we cannot permit, in the future, one code of ethics for the individual in his business or professional life, and another for his private life”. This is the dilemma of public relations practitioners who are constrained to put up with the nefarious activities of their clients and employers. To make matters worse, the society has come to accept, rather unfortunately, that cheating may pay (if you are not apprehended) and that honesty may not be the best policy after all.

As public relations practitioners, we have a role to play in bringing our society back to the glorious days of honesty, integrity, fair play, and respect for the law because these are the right things to do. We do know that ethical breaches are more rampant in organisations where ethical standards are low. High level employees usually sense the company’s priorities and direction and act accordingly.

The Nigerian Institute of Public Relations like others such as the Public Relations Society of America, British Institute of Public Relations and the International Public Relations Association have developed certain codes of ethics for its members nationally and internationally. The codes differ in matters of detail but they all seek to address the basic issue of the charter of human rights, protection of public interest and guide against unfair competition with members at their work places. The codes of ethics also cover other areas such as the use of undisclosed information, gifts, entertainment, favours, travel expenses, payment received by employees, protecting the professional reputation of other members, payment of professional fees, payment made by the corporation, political contributions, respect of other people's view points and a pledge to uphold the code of ethics.

The Institute has published the code of ethics since 1981 and has followed it up with a code of professional practice Bye Law No. 1 of 1992. It is still largely a document waiting to be put into action. Outside practice is in dire need of this implementation so that we can be sure that all those who answer as public relations practitioners are indeed qualified in deed and in truth.

Women in Public Relations

After the 1995 Beijing Conference, it may be unwise not to x-ray how women have fared in the profession. True, the public relations institute was developed by men, controlled by men but designed to suit women as well. This is why women have been very prominent in the Institute's activities at the chapter and national levels. Many women have risen to become advisers and directors of public relations in the private and public sectors. Today, about three women are Chapter Chairpersons and at least two women are on each of the existing chapter executives in all the states of the federation and the Federal Capital Territory.

This notwithstanding, public relations like other professions is not gender insensitive. Experience has shown that success in public relations is dependent on intellect and professional competence of the individuals in terms of his/her ability to discharge the onerous responsibilities of the modern day public relations officer.

Freedom of Speech and Association

Freedom of the press ... is not just important to democracy, it is democracy. Any government that stifles the press and refuses to allow its citizens to freely associate and speak is living in the 18th and 19th centuries if not farther back.

Walter Cronkite

Freedom to speak and write about public questions is as important 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. 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.

Justice Black

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.

Democratisation

Democracy is based upon the conviction that there are extraordinary possibilities in ordinary people.

Ronald Yates

Public relations would realise its full potentials better in a free and democratic society. Democracy is a universal concept and Nigeria's idea of developing a "home-grown" democracy is a mirage and an exercise in futility. If the present happenings are all we have to consider, would this specie of democracy be without freedom of speech and association? Would it promote flagrant disregard for human rights? What is the selling point of this elusive enduring democracy that may take two decades to achieve? Perhaps, Bernays unequivocal linkage between public relations and democracy would make this clearer – they simply need each other:

If society continues to function in a democratic way through

change and adjustment, through accommodation of varying groups and viewpoints of one with another, through progress at uneven rates of the constituent elements that make up society, there will be even greater necessity than there is today for a public relations practitioner. He will be helpful in evaluating the adjustments and maladjustments between the groups that make up the society, will advise his clients or employers on their attitudes and actions, will help them achieve their goals, and will interpret client or employer organisation to the public.

Public relations will thrive under a democratic government as it would be people-driven.

Integrated Marketing Communication

Interactivity and interdependence are hallmarks of modern public relations. This does not preclude the existence of some basic differences and areas of emphasis and specialisation.

Integrated Marketing Communications ... is a new way of looking at a whole, where once we only saw parts such as advertising, public relations, sales promotion, purchasing, employee communications, and so forth. It's realigning communications to look at it the way the customer sees it — as a flow of information from indistinguishable sources. Professional communicators have always been condescendingly amused that consumers called everything “advertising” or “PR.” Now they recognize with concern if not chagrin that that's exactly the point — it is all one thing, at least to the consumer who sees or hears it.

Don Schultz, 1992.

Public relations practitioners rather get embroiled in the controversy of which profession is “senior”, should work harder at its very broad and strategic such that its place is not doubted or confused. All the three professions are complimentary and the emphasis of any organisation would be determined by its corporate goals and vision.

Continuous Education

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.” 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 to a point. For all professional members, there is need for a “Public Relations Continuous Education Programme”. As Alvin Toffler puts it :

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 this reality.

In addition to all these, a crusade for intellectualising the practice of public relations must be embarked upon in the new millennium.

Conclusion

Public relations as a management function will continue to be strategic in organisations. As governance and economic management move towards greater participation by the private sector through such programmes as commercialisation, privatisation and deregulation, so will the expectations from public relations practitioners increase. The practitioners would have to become global in their approach to issues which would affect their clients and organisations in a most fundamental way. They would be expected to learn and unlearn, act proactively and target at becoming world class public relations professionals who are sought after by managements and boards.

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