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PUBLISHING IN-HOUSE CORPORATE JOURNALS: AIMS, OBJECTIVES, TYPES AND EVALUATION

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At any discussion of the tools of public relations, one may invariably have to go through the whole gamut of what public relations is all about before zeroing in on the assigned subject. While I may be able to avoid the issue of the several definitions of public relations and other related concepts, it is fair to let you know how I intend to go about this discussion on publishing in-house corporate journals.

As you can see, the two topics given me has been merged as one to avoid repetition and allow for good thought flow. Hence the parts:

Part I — Aims, Objectives and Types of Corporate In-House Journals

- A general discussion on the production of in-house corporate journals.
- The aims and objectives of the publications in consonance with that of the organisation.
- The types of corporate in-house journals and a measurement of their effectiveness and other peculiarities.

Part II — Evaluation and Effectiveness of In-House Corporate Journals

- A general guide to publishing in-house corporate journals *vis a vis* other publications.
- New vistas and conclusion.

At the end of this discussion, each participant should be able to publish better and highly professional in-house corporate journals. The objectives are summarised below:

- I. To facilitate a better understanding of the critical need for efficient employee communication through in-house journals for interpersonal, individual and interdepartmental information sharing.
- II. To know the strengths and weaknesses of the publication and minimise its effects, while giving the organisation the best results they can offer.
- III. To assist participants to act as protagonists of effective organisational publishing, excellent communication and joint achievement of corporate set goals.

Employee communication is one of the very critical strategies employed by organisations to shore up productivity, employee satisfaction and generally ensure that the team spirit is kept reasonably high.

The publishing responsibilities of the public relations practitioners makes it necessary to examine the relationship between journalism and public relations. There is no doubt that journalistic skills, especially in the area of writing, reporting, investigation and editing are very useful. Also, the earliest public relations practitioners were, first and foremost, journalists. In those days, public relations services were not as prominent in business and public life as they are today. Even then, public relations has continued to play prominent roles in the lives of the early beings till today. John Bitter (1987) puts this relationship succinctly when he averred that:

Public relations is a vehicle for persuasion, a provider of needed information. While not going into the academics of which of the two professions and even a tooter of various people's horns, has its roots in antiquity. What began to occur in the 1900s was not public relations' beginnings; rather, it was the start of the profession's maturation process as a profession.

Thus, the anomaly of equating proficiency in journalism with expertise in public relations is well worn and the reality today makes them distinctive professionals complementing each other very well. Any employer that looks at public relations through the journalistic prism is probably looking for a publicist and certainly not a public relations executive.

Part One: Publishing Aims and Objectives

Employees in many organisations have always complained of being in the dark about their organisation's activities. Most times, they hear the news of their organisations on the radio and television or in the pages of the newspapers. This observation is not restricted to the junior or middle-level managers alone, many senior and management staff are also affected especially in big companies and work places. Yet, effective and timely communication is a very critical factor in achieving the corporate objectives of any organisation.

Organisations publish in-house journals to achieve certain goals. Attempts to answer Ford Kanzler's seven posers gives an insight of the challenges before an organisation and its employees — *“who you are, what business you do, whom you are serving, what is required by your target markets, who are your competitors and what are the areas of pre-eminence and critical competencies of your business?”* The answers to these questions would necessary influence the goals of your organisation and have a direct bearing on the publication of your in-house journals.

It may also be necessary for us as the editors of the in-house journal to recognise its importance when compared with other channels and medium of communication used within organisations. The nearest mode of communication to in-house journals is the face-to-face or one-on-one sessions/meetings. Yes it has immediacy of achieving communication — passing the message and getting a feedback as its greatest advantage, yet the good old print medium to which the in-house journal belongs still has a big and critical role to play. It is portable, permanent, consistent and curtails some extraneous human interferences.

The objectives of publishing the in-house journals could be summarised as follows:

1. Ensuring free flow of information — vertically, horizontally and laterally.
2. Facilitating intra and inter departmental communication on the operations.
3. Keeping the organisational objectives and policies in constant focus.

4. Reinforcing the agreed messages and values from the top management.
5. Documenting the activities of the organisation.
6. Enhancing the quantum of information available to staff members and stakeholders.
7. Engendering the spirit of belonging and commitment in all the employees.
8. Galvanising broad based support and understanding for corporate goals, challenges and critical business priorities.

In-house journals are very expensive to produce and its influence goes far beyond the primarily targeted internal audiences. This is moreso with organisations that have wide public appeal and relevance. These journals are constantly making statements about the organisation producing them for what is published may be the only information that many non-members of the organisation get to know. That is why the editor as well as the sponsoring organisation should always ensure that their best foot is put forward.

Types of House Journals

There are many types of in-house publications that public relations executives use within their organisations to ensure effective and efficient use of information for greater productivity and enhanced bottom-line results. Among the many types of in-house journals are the Newsletter, News bulletin, Chief Executive Officer's Memorandum, Reports (Monthly, Bi-Monthly, Quarterly, Annual, Biannual, Biennial...). Of all these, the newsletter is the most frequently used in organisations and would therefore constitute the point of reference in this discussion.

Nonetheless, the Bulletin, Chief Executive Officer's Memo and other reports can easily be discussed along the lines of the newsletter to a greater or lesser degree depending on which one is being used. Below are their summarised descriptions:

News bulletin

This is a shorter version of the newsletter which carries few but special news. No articles are carried in it. It is usually pasted on the notice boards and/or circulated departmentally.

Chief Executive Officer's Memo

This is a special message considered to be of interest to staff. Rather than a general meeting, it serves as direct information from the CEO. This type of memo lifts the spirit of workers and makes them feel important and well regarded by management. It is however very occasional.

Reports

These are spot reports of research findings, periodic operational activity accounts... There are many of such publications. They are mainly meant for internal use but they are often handy when there is need to communicate the progress being made by the organisation with the external audiences.

Newsletter

It is an in-house publication by corporate bodies aimed at disseminating critical information to all the employees to satisfy both the formal and informal needs of the various interests within the organisation. It can take many shapes, sizes and its contents vary from one organisation to the other. Below are some characteristics of the newsletter:

Format — Tabloid (Newspaper) and Magazine.

Topics — The contents of a Newsletter vary from one organisation to the other. Generally, most of them will have some or all of the following:

- Editorial Comment
- Chief Executive's Column
- Personnel News
- Company Special Events
- Company Goals and Policies
- Employee Benefits (Welfare)
- Demographics

In trying to package an excellent newsletter that fits the requirements of a corporate body, it is important that the editor should work with all the departmental/unit heads so that the articles to be published would be current and reflect the totality of the current thinking of the entire management and the workforce. The newsletter would also be expected to feature articles that bring out the problems

of the organisation and the efforts being made to solve them. This could be done by featuring some dissatisfied customers, shareholders and clients. This is not to say you should use your in-house journals to cause trouble or the management, but it is important to tackle all issues as your doing it will bring the required balance and ample opportunity to explain why things are as they are.

Other areas to cover are the general trends in the industry and the state of other competitors and others operating in the same area of specialisation. When your newsletters are well focused on issues, the chances are that it would serve as a management tool and aid corporate success.

Part Two: Evaluation of Corporate Journals

The importance attached to the publication of in-house journals can only be realised if the public relations executive constantly reviews the content, style and format. Carol Howard asks nine pertinent questions that could be useful in evaluating the performance level of your in-house journal. The questions are:

- When your Chief Executive is interviewing potential directors for the board, are they given your publications as background?
- When the Human Resources Department is interviewing candidates for key jobs — especially senior positions — are your publications among the company materials provided them?
- When senior management has an important message to announce, or wants to drive a significant culture change, are you and your publications among the first to be included in the communications planning?
- When the business unit head is making a major change in strategy or operations, are you one of the first to be contacted — for your counselling as well as your communications skills?
- Can you list the three or four top business priorities and individual objectives of your CEO this year, and are those priorities reflected in the content of your publications?
- Do you know the top issues facing each of the company's major business units or geographic regions geopolitical zones — and have you stories on them?

- Can you describe the two or three most important pieces of legislation being considered in Washington and Brussels (Nigeria (mine), South Africa and Ghana) from your company's point of view — have you covered them in your publication?
- When a major management meeting or conference is taking place, are you aware of the agenda in advance so you can plan comprehensive, timely coverage of those items that are not too preliminary or proprietary?
- Are you on first-name terms with the members of your company's Management or Executive Committee and other key advisors to your CEO, and do they return your calls?

If your answers to more than two of these questions is “no”, then you and your publications may not be considered as a vital and strategic resource by the management of your organisation. In this age of budget cuts, outsourcing and weight shedding, it is not in your interest not to be reckoned with by management.

In order to enhance the quality of your journal, after having satisfactorily answered the nine probing questions above, it is important that you evaluate your publications regularly based on the following criteria:

- How widely read is the newsletter?
- Which aspects of the newsletter do the readers like most?
- What is their attitude to the length?
- What is their attitude to the style?
- How readable is the journal?
- How appealing is it?
- How useful are the informational contents?
- What suggestions do the readers give?
- Are you confident to send it for a competition?

The readability, level of “believability”, relevance, informational value and “enjoyability” of a journal would be the result when the publisher/editor takes these injunctions to heart and follow them.

Conclusion

Publishing in-house journals remains one of the critical responsibilities of the public relations executive in an organisation. As a matter of fact, many CEOs are so proud of theirs that, they personally see to it that it

is regularly published. They probably go further in contributing a regular column to it. Many organisations also depend on the in-house journals to pass important information to the staff to reinforce the corporate goals and also receive the needed feedback from the contributions of the staff through opinions expressed in the journal. The journal should continue to be a source of sound communication, sound business analysis, commitment to results and ensure team work.

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