

**APPRAISAL OF MEDIA RELATIONS PRACTICES OF RIVERS STATE UNIVERSITY BY
SELECT STAKEHOLDERS IN RIVERS STATE**

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated an Appraisal of Media Relations Practices of Rivers State University by Select Stakeholders in Rivers State. The objectives were; determine the media relations strategies applied by the public relations department of the Rivers State University; ascertain if the Rivers State University employed the services of professionals in the conception and application of the media relations strategies. This study anchored on The System Theory. It adopted the survey research design and Taro Yamane sample size determination formula was used to select a sample of 233 from the population of 560. The quantitative research methodology which necessitated the use of questionnaire and interview guide was used to generate data for the study. Findings showed that majority of the respondents indicated that the public relations department of Rivers State University applied media relations practices; majority of the respondents indicated that public relations department of Rivers State University employed the services of professionals in the conception and application of their media relations. The study concluded that the public relations department of the Rivers State University employed the services of professionals in the conception and application of their media relations practices hence the expansion in the institution. Therefore, the study recommended that there is need for the training and retraining of staff of the public relations department on how to conceive and apply the media relations practices. This will help increase the tempo of their attitude to work.

Keywords: Public Relations, Media Relations, Media, Stakeholders and Rivers State University.

INTRODUCTION

The debate that every institution, organisation, company or university needs media relations is on. The media provide working plans for the purpose of informing the public of the organisation's mission, policies and practices in a positive consistent and credible manner. Hence, what is important here is how an organisations particularly, university practices media relations especially with the stakeholders. According to Franzier and Frank (2007) different institutions and their stakeholders have special ways of practicing media relations. Franzier and Frank (2007) opines that as a result of this fact, ongoing relationships between an institution and the news media are vital. Thus, media relations have been and remain one of the most important areas of practice in public relations (Shaw & White, 2004). But the academic study of media relations was, for many years, subject to the stigma that it is primarily a tactical function of public relations programme (Grunig, 1990). And while measuring the impact of media relations has been a key area of interest for some time (Bollinger, 2001), research into the process of media relations has only recently sparked a large number of academic studies (Eyrich, Padman & Sweetser, 2008; Gonzalez & Ruiz, 2006; Larsson, 2009; Supa & Zoch, 2009).

Media relation in organisations has evolved tremendously. Some organisations have opened their doors for public relations professionals. However, it seems that organisations still battle to define the functions and the role of public relations, let alone positioning the discipline. It is evident that public relations' activities differ within the various organisations. This study, therefore, investigated

the role that public relations plays within the selected corporate organisations within the greater Durban area. Davis (2004, p. 202) argues that the media relations industry simply lacks credibility; people just do not take the industry seriously. Furthermore, the discipline might be regarded dispassionately as being positively beneficial to society but also questions why organisations are reluctant to let media relations' professionals "beat their own collective drum". Media relations deserves to be taken seriously by organisations, but, most times, it is assigned solely to 'low end' tasks hence, the home for media relations functions is still not clear in most organisations.

Thus, it is obvious to note that most institutions have not established or identified the role and position of media relations within their organisations. This finding is supported by Cutlip(2000:60) who argue that even practitioners disagree about what is the best structure and place for their functions in various types of organisations. Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2002: 262) states that there is a genuine need to develop a new paradigm under which media relations can function effectively in the interest of the University and the public it serves. Media relations can help organisations to inform both its own (internal) public and external ones, by providing information in a factual, easily understood format so that ignorance of an organisation or product can be overcome through knowledge and understanding. Media relations is a complex profession, an emerging industry that is at the art of all communication hence, it is imperative for all organisations whether private or public to establish their media relations practices.

Statement of the Problem

There is no doubt that the success of any organisation rests on its ability to create and sustain good relationship with the journalists through honest and open information. Also, in today's world, achieving high performance and productivity is dependent on the media relations strategies applied by media relations/public relations department and the kind of mutual understanding that exist between the organisation and its publics. Thus, one of the main functions of media relations practitioners in any organisation is to ensure a good relationship between the organisation and the journalists.

Most universities and their stakeholders have tried to improve their media relations by applying special strategies. Based on this aphorism, media relations strategies and journalists view are facilitating mutual understanding, good image and a better relationship with the journalists. Moreso, through the establishment of a mutual understanding with the journalists, the stakeholders of the Rivers State University would be able to tell their own part of the story, address multiple stakeholder needs, reduce the uncertainty of customers (students) work with government agencies that specialize quality education and communication directly with media and the public. Therefore, since this form of communication is growing at such rapid pace and becoming more exciting and interesting, this study investigated the media relations practices of the Rivers State University by select stakeholders in Rivers State.

Objectives of the Study

The study has the following objectives

determine the media relations strategies applied by the public relations department of the Rivers State University;

Ascertain if the Rivers State University employed the services of professionals in the conception and application of the media relations strategies.

Determine the extent to which the applications of media relations enhanced the performance of the institution.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the under-listed research questions.

What are the media relations practices applied by the public relations department of the Rivers State University?

Did the public relations department of Rivers State University employ the services of professionals in the conception and application of the media relations strategies?

How does the application of the media relations practices enhance the performance of the institution?

Empirical Review

Nwachukwu (2008) carried out a study on: The Assessment of the cordially effects of the media relations strategies of the National Institute for Nigerian Language (NILAN), Aba in the management of the 2004-2006 internal crisis. The study found out that NINLAN management did not consider media relations as a vital tool in the 2004 to 2006 crisis. Although the head IPPR, NINLAN said the management considered media relations important hence the establishment of the IPPR office and the practice of media relations by the institute. The study further revealed that NINLAN did not engage in any deliberate media relations activities aimed at the management of the 2004 to 2006 internal crisis. In another study, Matthew Agholor & Barwa (2014) carried out on appraisal of the "media relations practices of Madona University, Elele, Rivers State". The study was aimed at evaluating the media relations practices of Madona University by the stakeholders. Furthermore, the study found out that unclear statements, omissions, language difference, gender difference, lack of organization idea and awkward sentence structure were barriers to communication between the institution and stakeholders. The study equally revealed that listening, wandering around, use of e-mail communication, following due process, trust between senior staff and subordinates and provision of telephone would minimize barriers to communication between the institution and stakeholders.

Theoretical Framework

The Systems Theory

The System Theory was propounded by Ludwig Von Bertalanffy in 1955. The systems theory is handy in media relations because it throws more light on ways to think about relationship. The systems theory emphasizes on the interdependence of an organization with its environment, both internal and external (Lattimore, 2009). According to Black (1990) the systems theory looks at an organizations as a makeup of interrelated parts, adapting and adjusting to changes in the political, economic and social environment in which they operate. Moss (1990) states that the systems theory places emphasis on the interdependence of an organization with its environment, both internal and external with a good communication structure to achieve organizational goals.

Gruning and Dozier (2002) posit the systems theory emphasizes that organizations depend on resources from their environments, such as the raw materials, media relations, employees and customers or clients for services or products while the environment needs the organization for its goods and services. The theory enables one to understand better that an organisation form part of a social system which consists of individuals, groups (internal and external publics). The systems theory believes that organizations exist by accepting inputs from the publics, thereby, transforming them into output.

The systems theory also maintains that an organization with open system use media relations practitioners to bring back information on how productive their relationships are with journalists, employees, clients and other stakeholders. While organizations with closed systems do not seek new information rather operate on history or their preference (Watz, 1992). This implies that the relevance of the media relations in an organization establish better understanding between the organization and the journalists.

Furthermore, Tench and Yeomans (2006:27) postulate that it is clear that organisations are not free-floating bodies unaffected by what is around them. They are affected by and in turn affect the

environment in which they operate. Systems Theory describes organisations as a set of subsystems that affect each other and jointly interact with the external environment. Lubbe and Puth (2002:41) define a system as 'a set of objects or entities that interrelate with one another to form a whole'. Organisations have to adjust and adapt as they change from within and as the environment changes. They form part of a social system that consists of individuals or groups such as suppliers, local communities, employees, customers and government, who all interact with it. Public relations are there to develop and maintain good relationship with these publics, to help the organisation achieve its objectives. Tench and Yeomans (2006:27) describe organisations as having typically five subsystems.

Therefore public relations are important to build an understanding and knowledge of the contribution of both terrains to the importance of relationships. Emphasis should also be placed on the strategic importance of public relations in organisations so that organisations may acquire a holistic approach to communication and relationship management. Lubbe and Puth (2002:41) reinforce that it should also be noted that in addition to all the public relations functions, the open systems approach gives public relations the role to recognise changes in the organisation's social settings and advise clients or employees on how the organisation should change itself and respond to establish a common meeting ground". Public relations professionals are agents and managers of change, both inside and outside their organisations. The systems theory is vital to this study because it will help to establish interdependence, synergy and interconnection within and outside the organization and that organization must put a communication structure that will guide it to achieve its organizational goals. The questionnaire comprised two sections, A and B. Section A elicited demographic data while section B elicited psychographic information. The questionnaire contained a total of twenty (20) closed-ended items. Section A contained five (5) items while the section B contained eighteen (15) closed-ended items. The closed-ended items were structured using the four points likert scale (Weighted Mean Score) while the interview guide contained four (4) items. Items 1-5 were used to elicit demographic data; items 6-9 were used to answer research question one (1); items 10-13 were used to answer research question two (2); items 14-17 were used to answer research question three (3) while items 18-20 were used to answer research question four (4) respectively. As for the interview segment, the same ideas were followed and four (4) questions in line with the four research questions were asked.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted survey research design. The choice of this design was based on its simplicity in considering both small and large population because it deals with the opinions and attitudes of people involved in a phenomenon. Thus, the researcher considered it more appropriate as it elicit The population of this study comprised of two streams of universe, all the staff in the public relations Department of the Rivers State University and all the stakeholders of the institution. Hence, the population of the staff of the public relations department of (RSU) is (10) according to the Public Relation Department of RSU. While the population of the journalists in Port Harcourt is 550 according to National Union of Journalists Secretariat, Port Harcourt (NUJ) Rivers State branch. Therefore, the total population of this study is 560 by summation of the streams of universe

The study employed Taro Yamane sample size. The formula for Taro Yamane is given below:

Sample Size

Where n = Sample size; N = population; e = Level of significance $(0.05)^2 \times 0.05$.

Therefore, the sample size of the study is 233.

The sampling technique adopted for the study is the purposive sampling technique. The purpose of adopting purposive sampling technique was to select right respondents for the investigation since it is not possible to study all the members of a population while sampling involves making this

selection. The researcher utilised questionnaire and interview guide for the collection of data for this study. Therefore, out of the two hundred and thirty-three (233) copies of the questionnaire that were distributed, the response rate was two hundred (200) copies. Two research assistants were employed for the exercise and it took two weeks.

Data Presentation

4.1 Approval that the Public Relations Department applied Media Relations Practices

Response Category

Frequency

Percentage

Using press release to spread the word

150

75

Targeting Local TV stations and media outlets

50

25

Targeting Local TV stations and media outlets

Nil

0

Total

200

100

Table 4.1 indicated that majority of the respondents indicated that the media relations strategies apply by the public relation is the press release.

Table 4.2: Approval that the Media Relations Practices enhanced the Performance of the Institution

Response Category

Frequency

Percentage

Yes

180

90

No

20

10

None of the above

Nil

0

Total

200

100

Data in table 4.2 above shows that majority of the respondents maintained that the media relations practice applied by the public relations department of Rivers State University enhanced the performance of the institution.

4.3 Approval that the Public Relations Department Employ the Services of Professionals

Response Category

Frequency

Percentage

Yes

150

75

No

50

25

None of the above

Nil

0

Total

200

100

Data in table 4.3 showed that majority of the respondents indicated that the public relations department of Rivers State University employed the services of professionals in the conception and application of media relations strategies.

Discussion of Findings

Data presented and analysed provided the basis for this discussion. This was done in accordance with the four research questions raised to guide the study.

Research question (1): What are the media relations practices applied by the public relations department of the Rivers State University?

Findings showed that majority of the respondents 150 (75%) indicated that the public relations department of Rivers State University applied media relations practices. The findings is in agreement with the tenets of the system theory which emphasizes on the interdependence of an organization with its environment both internal and external. The systems theory looks at an organisation as a makeup of interrelated parts adapting and adjusting to changes in the political, economic and social environment in which they operate. The systems theory also maintains that an organization with open system use media relations practitioners to bring back information on how productive their relations are with journalists, employees, clients and other stakeholders while organizations with closed system do not seek new information rather operate on history or their preference. Findings of the study also corroborate social responsibility is the integrity which an organization governs itself, its mission, lived by its values, engages with its impacts and publicity reports on its activities.

Therefore, public relations is important to build an understanding and knowledge of the contribution of both terrains to the importance of relationships. Hence, emphasis should also be placed on the strategic importance of public relations in organizations so that they may acquire a holistic approach to communication and relationship. The study is also in agreement with early studies carried out by Nwachukwu (2008) whose study revealed that the media relations activities that help organizations establish better understanding and good relationship with stakeholders and achieve great

performance which include identifying with stakeholders, students, host community, development efforts, putting in place a welfare package for staff such as in serving, training, health cares, promotion, regular payment of salaries and constant communication with the media.

Research question 2: Did the public relations department of Rivers State University employ the services of professionals in the conception and application of their media relations strategies?

Findings of the study shows that majority of the respondents indicated that public relations department of Rivers State University employed the services of professionals in the conception and application of their media relations. Findings of the study is also in agreement with earlier studies carried out by Matthew, Agholor and Barwa (2014) whose studies revealed that unclear statements, omission, language difference, gender difference, lack of organization idea and awkward sentence structure were barriers to communication between the institution and stakeholders. Findings of the study is also in agreement with earlier studies carried out by Nwachukwu (2008) whose study revealed that the media relations activities that help organization establish better understanding and good relationship with stakeholders and achieved great performance which include identifying with stakeholders, students, host community, development efforts, putting in place a welfare package for staff such as in serving ,training, healthcare, promotions, regular payment of salaries and constant communication with the media.

The findings of the study is in affirmative with the principle of the systems theory which states that an organization forms part of a social system which consists of individuals, groups (internal and external publics). The theory also maintained that an organization with open system use media relations practitioners to bring back information on how productive their relationships are with journalists, employees, clients and other stakeholders. The findings of this study is in agreement with the principle of Corporate Social Responsibility Theory which states that corporate social responsibility is about the integrity with which an organisation governs itself, its mission applied its stakeholders and measured its impacts and publicity reports on its activities.

Research question 3: How does the application of media relations practices enhance the performance of the institution?

Findings of this study showed that majority of the respondents maintained that the application of media relations practice enhanced the performance of the institution. The findings of the study is in agreement with the tenants of the Corporate Social Responsibility Theory which states that there is need for the application of this theory in the management of our environment and that it is an essential instrument of civil social responsibility for the development and transformation of our cities, slums and the provision of necessary amenities, jobs and infrastructural facilities.

The findings of the study also corroborates with the tenets of the principles of the system theory which states that it looks at an organization as a makeup of interrelated parts, adapting and adjusting to changes in the political, economic and social environment in which they operate. The findings of the study equally affirms with earlier studies carried out by Nwachukwu (2008) whose study revealed that media organisations establish better understanding and good relationship with stakeholders and achieve great performance which identifying with stakeholders, students, host community development efforts, putting in place a welfare package for staff such as in serving trainings, healthcare, promotion, regular payment of salaries and constant communication with the media.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, the study concluded that public relations department of the Rivers State University applied media relations practices in their day to day activities. Also, the study concluded that the public relations department of the Rivers State University employed the services of professionals in the conception and application of their media relations practices hence the expansion in the institution. Equally, the study concluded that the majority of the respondents indicated that the application of the media relations practices by the public relations department of

the Rivers State University enhanced the performance of the institution, hence the introduction of new faculties and departments in the school. Lastly, the study concluded that majority of the respondents indicated that the select stakeholders of Rivers State University encountered some challenges in the application of the media relations practices. The findings also revealed that although the select stakeholders of Rivers State University encountered some challenges, they were able to proffer solution to the problems hence the relative peace that have existed in the institution between the management, staff and students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the strength of the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made to improve media relations practices of Rivers State University by select stakeholders in Rivers State. There is need for the training and retraining of staff of the public relations department on how to conceive and apply the media relations practices. This will help increase their attitude to work. All existing laws of the institution and its units should be reviewed to enhance enforcement. Thus, such review should create room for a supervisory body to oversee the implementation of the laws. It is good and relevant for any university to consciously plan and organize workshops, conferences, seminars and lectures to improve on the conception and application of media relations practices as well as oriented them on the importance of their job.

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