

JOURNALIST'S VIEW OF MEDIA RELATIONS STRATEGIES OF UNIVERSITY OF PORT HARCOURT TEACHING HOSPITAL

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Abstract

This study evaluated journalists view of media relations strategies of the University Of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital. To achieve this, the study raised four objectives amongst others are: Find out how journalists view the media relations strategies adopted by the management of the University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital; ascertain the type of media relations strategies utilized by the PR units of UPTH; determine if the media relations strategies adopted by the PR unit of the University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital. The study anchored on two theories; the stakeholders' and the systems theory. The study also adopted yielded good results in carrying out their duties the descriptive survey research design and purposive sampling techniques. Quantitative research methodology which instigated the use of the questionnaire and interview were used to generate data for the study. The total population of the study was four hundred and fifty (450), comprising all the staff in the public relations Department of the University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital and all the registered journalists in Port Harcourt. The findings of the study revealed that a higher proportion of the respondents maintained that the media relations strategies of the UPTH are good. The findings also showed that majority of the respondents identified conferences town hall meeting seminars hospital tore and advertorials as part of the media relations strategies utilized by the PR unit of UPTH. The study therefore, recommended among others that; there is need for the training and retraining of staff of the public relations department on how to conceive and apply media relations strategies. This will, however, create room for a supervisory body to oversee the implementation of laws.

Introduction

Every organization, institution or parastatal adopts media relations strategies in other to achieve set objectives. This involves the special working plans with the journalists for the purpose of informing the public on the organization's mission, policies and practices in a positive consistent and credible manner. Typically, this means coordinating directly with the people responsible for producing the news, editorial and features in the mass media.

According to Franzier & Frank (2004), different institutions and hospitals media relations' department have special way of relating with journalists. However, dealing with the media presents unique challenges in that the news media cannot be controlled. Franzier& Frank

(2004) reiterated this line of thought and opined that because of these facts, ongoing relationships between an organization and the news media is vital.

Okafor (2006) maintains that media relations are the communication between an organization, journalist and the media outfit. Communication is one of the most dominant and important activities in an organization. It is the act of imparting a common idea or understanding to another person. Therefore, the idea that communication in every organization is very central to the stability, well-being, peace, progress and performance of their functions including planning, directing, controlling, decision making and execution of the decisions.

Thus, the image and integrity of the leaders, sectional heads, management, operations and performance can only be achieved through communication between the organization and the media organization. It is in light of this, that institutions and organizations strive to ensure that they maintain good and favourable relationship with the journalists. The kind of communication between the hospital management and the journalists enables the journalists to present to the general public, good image of the organization, thereby, expounding the customer's base of the organization.

According to Okafor (2006), the media relations in any organization would be incomplete without effective communication that leads to healthy relationship. In his 1906 Declaration of principles; Ivy Lee briefly maintained that;

our plan is frankly and openly, on behalf of business concerns and public institutions, to supply the press and public of the United States prompt and accurate information concerning subjects which is value and interest to the public to know about (Guth& Marsh, 2003).

Furthermore, Guth & Marsh (2003) maintained that while this was not the first time that the power of the media was harnessed to effect change, it may have been the first instance of proactive truthful and accurate information dissemination, which today has become the gold standard in media relations.

Also, Kendal (1996) stressed that the media relations is the systematic, planned, purposeful and mutually beneficially relationship, between the journalists in the mass media and public relations practitioners in an organization. Its goal is to establish trust, understanding and respect between the two groups (Lattimore, 2004). More also, Fating (2004) opines that it all comes down to relationships of trusting reporters that know and I do not trust the reporters I do not know.

Fating (2004) went further to say that most of the people have long standing relationships with journalists that are based on mutual trust. He concluded by saying that the advice to the media relations practitioners is to know the journalists who covers their industry well and develop mutual credibility with them.

According to Lattemote (2004), whether we examines media relations in a historical context or look at the modern day practices, one thing is certain, effective media relations strategies involves good working relationships. (Duke, 2001), affirms that the media relations person deals with the writers, editors, producers and photographers and not with newspapers, television station, radio microphones and web sites.

This study therefore, seeks to ascertain the type media relations strategies adopted by the media relations practitioners in University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital.

This study was guided by two theories, the Stakeholder Theory and the Systems Theory.

Stakeholder Theory

This theory was first advanced by Edward Freeman in 1984. The theory posits that an organization has stakeholders who can be identified as individuals or groups who help to project the good image of the organization and benefit from it or adversely affected by the organization's activities. These stakeholders include: the journalists, employees, host communities, customers, government, suppliers and distributors etc. (Wraggs, 1992).

According to Wraggs (1992) the stakeholders are classified into four groups: Enabling publics, Functional publics, Normative publics and Diffused publics.

The enabling publics are those publics that help the organization to establish better understanding and good working relationship with the journalists and the media. The functional publics are the public's that enables the organization to perform its chosen task for

example, the employees that carry out the day to day functions in the organization or hospital, the customers or citizens that receive the goods or services of the organization or hospital, trade unions or those customers that attest to the worthiness of the goods and services (Wraggs, 1992).

Stakeholders' theory is generally concerned with the ways an organization establishes better understanding and favourable relationship with the journalists. The theory states that the organization's success or failure will be dependent on the successful management of all the relationships that it has with its stakeholders, one of which is the journalists. Hence, the stakeholder's theory emphasizes on the establishment of better understanding and good relationship with the stakeholders of the organization. This theory suggests that an organization's continued existence requires the support and co-operation of its stakeholders whose opinion must be sought, diffused and utilized.

Thus, this theory is relevant to this study because an organization's success depends upon the relationship it has with its stakeholders especially the journalists who helps to project the good image of the organization or hospital.

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.

According to Gruning & Dozier (2002) 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 organization 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.

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.

Media Relations

Media relations can be defined as the systematic planned, purposeful and mutually beneficially relationship between journalists in the media and public relations practitioners (Guth & Marsh, 2003). Its goal is to establish trust, understanding and respect between the two groups (James, 2007; Miller, 1984; Kendall, 1996).

According to Nolte (1979), Carter (1958), though terms like mutually beneficial and relationship are often used on defining both public relations and media relations, the effort in both cases generally is initiated from the public relations side and not that of the journalists. This may be as a result of a solid prejudice against the public relations practitioners by the journalists which has been examined by academic for many years.

Furthermore, Howard & Matthews (2000) opines that whether one examine the media relations in a historical context or at the modern-day practices, one thing is certain; effective media relations involves good working relationship. In addition, Howard (2004), Duke (2001), maintained that public relations is a people to people business while a media relations persons deals with the writers, editors, producers, and photographers and not with the newspapers, television stations, radio microphones and websites.

According to Zoch & Molleda (2006); Turk, (1985) the media relations is the practice performed by the public relations practitioners or providing information subsidies to journalists to systematically distribute information on behalf of their client. Information subsidy is a term used to describe the generation by practitioners of prepackaged information to promote their organizations viewpoints on issues, with little cost in terms of time or money or effort to the person receiving the information (Salwen, 1998). In other words, the media relations practitioners acts as a sort of "pre-reporter" for the journalists, providing them with information that they need to do their jobs. Furthermore, Sallot & Steinfatt (1998) explained the process as an effort by practitioners "to gain ink and on time" by continually offering journalists unsolicited assistance in the performance of their jobs. Thus, with good reason, journalists perceive that practitioners have self-serving motives for offering this service.

In addition, Curtin (1999); Pincus, Rimmer, Rayfield & Cropp (1993) opines that there are varying estimates of how much news in the media originates from media relations efforts. The success of media relations is most often dependent on the media relations practitioners understanding of the media audience. Also, Curtin (1999) states that it has been estimated that as much as 50% or more of daily newspaper content originates from media relations efforts.

This however, is most likely very generous, particularly considering that media relations practitioners and journalists have had a rocky past.

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Seitel (2007) sums up the current state of the media according to public relations practitioners:

Where once the media were dominated by a handful of powerful, truth-minded

reporters and editors at a handful of newspapers and three national TV networks, today the media are fragmented, omnipresent, busy 24 hours a day/ seven days a week, and populated by a breed of reporter who is aggressive, opinionated, sharp-elbowed, and more than willing to throw himself or herself personally into the story being covered.. Today, more often than not, with competition from thousands of daily newspapers, talk radio stations, cable TV channels, and bloggers as far as the eye can see, reporters have few qualms about using anonymous sources, losing their historic anonymity, and becoming part of the story, (p. 173)

So where does this leave the media relations practitioner? First and foremost, it means that the practitioner must keep in mind the changing roles of the media. As is the case in all public relations, but in particular for the media relations practitioner, the public interest must be kept in mind at all times. Brooks' (1999) discussion of the "media supply chain" offers the solution for media relations practitioners by clearly delineating the job of both the media relations practitioner and the journalist. A media relations practitioner's job is to provide information devoid of "impurities," and the journalist's job is to transform that material, along with his or her own information, sources and ideas into a finished product, though Barger & Barney (2004) indicate that there is a greater moral obligation that lies on the media as trustees of the public trust - even if that trust is waning (Geary, 2005).

Media Relations Strategies of University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital

The media through the journalist provide feedback information to organizational policies and programmes through research and evaluation process. Also their functions include media relations, community relations, employee relations, corporate identity/image, sponsor relations and protocol relations etc.

Nkwocha (1999) highlighted some media relations strategies adopted by the public relations department of the University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital, some of these include:

1. **Express releases:** These may appear in newspapers, radio and television and other new media. This deal with a lot issues depending on the organization. For example, the Nigerian Prison Service practices
2. **Conferences and seminars:** many organizations including prisons organize conferences and seminars for the employees, inmates and the general public.
3. **Special events:** Hospital management organizes special events. Also these includes the following:

News

The issue of what makes something worthy of being identified as news has been a long-standing debate, not only from the public relations perspective, but from the journalistic side as well. The axiom that news is what an editor says it is may no longer be applicable in a changing media environment. Decisions on what is or is not news still lies, to some extent, with editors, but also with journalists, photographers, bloggers, freelancers, publishers and in some media, the members of the public themselves. While the editor may be the final decision-maker in print news, this may not always be the target of the media relations practitioner.

In a study presented to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Zoch & Supa (2005) did an exhaustive search of literature in journalism, and broke down their findings to include eight factors of newsworthiness that, according to the literature, should identify what

makes news. Those factors identified were: immediacy, timeliness, localness, human interest, cultural proximity, unexpectedness, prominence and significance.

Kopenhagen, Martinson & Ryan (1984) found out in their study journalists and public relations practitioners agreed "remarkably" on which elements of news are most important. But the authors of this study do point out that the practitioners were asked to answer questions on elements of news in an abstract way and that in practice they might behave differently. In addition the news elements used in the 1984 study were far different than those based on the literature reviewed in the Zoch&Supa (2005) study. Kopenhagen, Martinson & Ryan used accuracy, interest to reader, usefulness to reader, completeness, prompt publication, depicts subject in favorable light, mechanical/grammatical correctness and news story style; which replicated Aronoff's (1975) study.

Baus (1954) states that "news is something that interests many people today" (p.451), and that this generally means "many people" according to the publication. Baus continues, "Every medium has a new standard of its own, and this is the criterion the publicist goes by in attempting to address publicity to the public through that medium." In other words "news is something that interests many of our readers today" (p.451, italics in original).

Findings revealed that a large number of the respondents maintained that it because the Hospital management applied excellent and better media relations strategies, hence it created good and favourable relationship between the Hospital Management and Journalists. The finding corroborates the earlier study carried out by Nwachukwu (2008) which shows that the hospital management used professional in the conception and execution of these strategies.

Findings show that a higher number of the respondents listed the constraints as follows; lack of adequate fund lack, lack of good medical facilities and lack of adequate man power. The findings also revealed that the Hospital

management was able to proffer solutions to the problems hence; they were able to overcome the challenges. Thus, this cumulated to huge success and performance. The findings is in agreement with stakeholder theory (1984) and systems theory (1955) which 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.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, the study concluded that journalists' view of media relations strategies of UPTH was good and perfect. However, the findings coincide with earlier studies conducted by Nwachukwu (2008) whose study revealed that media relations activities help organizations establish better understanding and good relationship with journalists.

Also, it helped them to achieve greater performance which includes; identifying with the journalist, host communities, development efforts, putting in place a welfare package for staff such as in-service training and retraining, healthcare, promotions, regular payment of salaries and constant communication with the media.

Equally, the study concluded that the interviewees maintained that the media relations strategies of UPTH were good and that hospital management employed the services of professional in the conception and execution of media relations strategies. The study also, concluded that the hospital management applied excellent and better media relations strategies, hence it created good and favourable relationship between the hospital and the journalists.

The study equally concluded that the management of UPTH faced some challenges in the application of the media relations strategies in the hospital, although the hospital management were able to proffer solutions hence, the huge successes recorded in their

day to day operation and customer satisfactions.

Recommendations

Based on the strength of the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made to improve journalists' perception of media relations strategies of University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital (UPTH).

1. There is need for the training and retraining of staff of the public relations department on how to conceive and apply the media relations strategies. This will help increase the tempo of their attitude to work.
2. All existing laws of the hospital 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.
3. It is good and relevant for any hospital or organization to conscientiously plan and organize workshops, conferences, seminars and lectures to improve on the conception and execution of media relations strategies as well as orientate them on the importance of their job.
4. Public and private hospitals health institutions, clinics and organizations should be re-oriented on the relevance of media relations strategies in the organizations. Until these issues are addressed and changes made, the journalist view of media relations strategies will not improve beyond this level. Moreso, the application of these media relations strategies in the day to day discharge of their duties will not make any noticeable progress. Finally, such progress will not occur except the usefulness of media relations planning strategies is considered germane in the present day hospital management and medical practice in Port Harcourt and Nigeria at large.

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