

**CONCEPTUALISING PUBLIC RELATIONS' STRATEGIES AS
A MAJOR TOOL IN MANAGING COMMUNICATION IN
ORGANISATIONS: A STUDY OF NIGER MILLS PLC,
CALABAR, CROSS RIVER STATE.**

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Abstract

The relevance of communication rests on its effectiveness. Effective communication means employing good communication strategies to reach out to a target audience. In the case of a company, this target audience is either the employees, who are the internal audience or external stakeholders. In both ways, the organisation requires good communication approaches. These approaches are strategies which are capable of capturing the attention of these audiences. Most times, it is noted that the management of organisations do not consider the subject of communication as relevant to the growth of their organisations. Surprising, there are hardly any communication strategies evolved by the leaders of these organisations to reach out to their publics. The study seeks to establish if there were communication or Public Relations strategies evolved by Niger Mills, Plc, to communicate with its publics, and to what extent the company achieved its organisational goals as a result of these strategies. The work is premised on James Grunig's (2002) excellence theory of Public Relations. A survey, with the aid of a structured interview was carried out with 15 staff members of the Company interviewed. Results of the finding showed that there are no spelt out Public Relations Strategies operative in the Niger Mills, Plc,

Calabar. The study recommends among other things that an in-house Public Relations Department be established in the company in order to strengthen communication efficiency in it.

Keywords: Communication, Effective, Employees, Public Relations Strategies

Background of the Study

Communication holds an esteemed place in our lives as human beings. It is common place to say communication takes a lead among the primes of human existence. The presence of peculiar communication streams in man separates him from other animal species. Accordingly, Scott-Philips and Blythe (2013) hold that, “the uniquely expressive power of human language requires humans to create and use signals in a flexible way”. It is their believe that this process is made possible by “the evolution of particular psychological abilities which make language unique in humans” (Scott-Philips & Blythe, 2013).

Yet, without efficient transmission, these signals as enunciated by these scholars cannot be effective. Therefore, the efficient transmission of communication signals, which we refer to here as Public Relations Strategies, is the main stay of this study.

Communication, wherever it is involved, is evaluated by the level of efficiency displayed. Effective communication has become a scale for measuring successes and failures in organisations. Organisational leaders have come to accept the fact that communication must be placed at the fore in order for them to achieve maximum efficiency in management/employee relationships (Miller, 2016). And as posited by Fielding (2016), “effective communication in any organization is imperative, as its absence can stampede a lot of functions”.

The various views, as put forth by these scholars, show the relevance of communication as a relational tool for human existence. So, communication relevance cannot be achieved without a major communication channel in an organisation. This is where Public Relations becomes necessary as a viable channel in organisations. We cannot help but see Public Relations as a wheel that spins information in organisation round.

This work, therefore considered, as a study, the level at which Public Relations functions in Niger Mill Plc., Calabar, and the PR strategies which the company uses to manage communication between it and its publics.

Statement of the Problem

Every viable business organisation focuses on brand promotion, sales increment and profit maximisation. Accordingly, Yuanzhory (2005) posited that, “brand strategy is useful to strengthening competitive competence of a product. Apart from promoting their brands, organisations also strive to build their corporate image and reputation so as to secure sufficient trust by their publics. To achieve all these, organisations need a satisfactory Public Relations’ Strategies.

Organisations equally need to maintain a sustainable mutual understanding with their publics so as to survive in a competitive business environment. If an organisation must achieve this feat, then the communication issues in the organisation must be handled by communication experts so as to create a window for co-existence between the organisation and its publics (Keeble, 2006).

Incidentally, while studies in Public Relations’ Strategies abound, researches on how to effectively execute communication issues in Niger Mills Plc, using Public Relations’ Strategies are not confirmed to be found in existing literature. It is this gap in literature that this work seeks to close.

Objectives of the Study

This study focused on conceptualising Public Relations as a strategic management function than a simple messaging, publicity and media relations function. Therefore, the following objectives were formulated to guide the study.

- 1) To ascertain if Niger Mill Plc, has proven Public Relations Strategies that are capable of promoting organisational goals.
- 2) To find out if Public Relations Strategies in Niger Mill Plc, are capable of enhancing communication efficiency between it and its publics.
- 3) To evaluate the possibility of establishing a functional in-house Public Relations department in Niger Mill Plc.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to assist the research effort.

- 1) Does Niger Mill Plc have proven Public Relations Strategies that are capable of promoting organisational goals?
- 2) Does Niger Mill Plc have Public Relations Strategies that can enhance communication efficiency between it and its publics?
- 3) What is the possibility of establishing functional in-house Public Relations department in Niger Mill Plc.

Significance of the Study

This study is intended to educate owners of industries, top management bodies, government functionaries and the general public on the need to recognise the place of Public Relations as a management function. The study is also meant to encourage effective application of Public Relations Strategies as a means of maintaining management-customer relationship. It is important to state that this study will produce a public sensitisation on the need for effective in-house Public Relations' Units in organizations, and above all, add relevance to the work of other communication experts who have researched on the need for Public Relations Practice in organisations.

Review of Related Literature

This section examines the contribution of other researchers on the subject of Public Relations Strategies as an anchor point in managing communication in organisations.

The Concept of Public Relations Strategies

By strategies, we are considering plans or series of actions that are meant to achieve a goal. We consider Public Relations Strategies on the same line as, planned series of Public Relations actions that are meant to help an organisation achieve goals. We cannot, but see Public Relations as an effective service providing unit in an organisation. According to Erica & Bruce (2001) "Public Relations effective service providing goes with effective planning; effective planning runs in series; and serial planning creates room for evaluation before execution". Fundamentally, the concept of Public Relations Strategies is a grip on organisations' unflinching relationship with its publics.

On their own, organisations have laid down plans of actions. These plans are equally strategies which the Public Relations unit of the organisation works in conjunction with. Lauren (1995) holds that, “for there is a high need for a mutual understanding amongst the various units of an organisation if the organisation must achieve a complete success”. So, Public Relations overall plans need to align with the general plans of the organisation, given, especially that this corporate synergy is what the organisation requires to strive in a competitive environment.

Johnston & Zawawi (2004, p.171) maintain that, “a successful Public Relations Strategy starts with the internal publics of an organisation”. These are the employees and management staff of an organisation. The duo point out that Public Relations Strategy means “educating management about the value of strategic planning”. Generally, Public Relations Strategy is the summation of organisation’s communication input in every organisational plan.

Some experts refer to Public Relations Strategies as planned activities designed and integrated to achieve a stated organisational goal (Cutlip et al 2005). Of note is the fact that, management in organisation draws a long term plan that becomes the target for achievement. This plan cannot be executed in a boardroom; it has to be communicated to the various units of the organisation saddled with implementation responsibility. This plan cannot be useful if it is not properly communicated to implementation units. This plan needs to be communicated to the implementation units by experts – the Public Relations Practitioners.

According to Mintzberg & Quinn (1991), as cited by Cutlip et al (2005, p.349) Public Relations Strategy is;

A well formulated strategy that helps to marshal and allocate organisations’ resources into unique and viable posture based on its relative internal competencies and shortcomings, anticipated changes in the environment and contingent moves by an intelligent opponent.

Again, one needs to note that, organisations’ activities, both internal and external, involve dealing with complex publics. So, it is required that management and Public Relations managers need to coordinate a comprehensive strategy to meet the teeming demands of these publics.

Until a relationship which is capable of lifting the organisation's image is created between the general management and Public Relations managers, the organisation cannot achieve its set goals. On this, D'Aprix (1996, p.5) states that;

A Public Relations Strategy is a process by which the leadership of an organisation deliberately manages its communications proactively so that they are open, candid and primarily focused on the market place and the customer as first course.

Public Relations as Management Function

Given that organisations are complex entities, and that the human components which lead these organisations are themselves complex, it becomes pertinent that structures in organisational setting should be compartmentalised for the purpose of effective delivery. So, it is not unaccustomed that Public Relations, as a professional unit, be so compartmentalised so the organisation can achieve effective understanding with its publics.

In the same vein, George & Michael (2001, p.577) see Public Relations as "a management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedure of organisations with public interest, executing programmes of action to earn public understanding and acceptance", Cutlip, Center & Broom (2005, p.1) also say, "Public Relations is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the publics on whom its successes or failures depends". The place of Public Relations in an organisation, as enunciated by these scholars, is so integral, without which communication issues between an organisation and its publics cannot be addressed.

As a management function, Public Relations must be allowed to exist horizontally with its sister departments in an organisation. Jefkin (1998, p.244) states that, "Public Relations functions as a bridge between an organisation and its component bodies, and between the organisation and its environment". He argues strongly that, with such vital function, Public Relations can only give out its best if operated in an organisation as a department.

Public Relations' success in an organisation is based on its spelt out objectives achieved through strategic planning. These objectives are

harnessed to give the organisation a bearing with its consumers; these objectives are geared towards keeping the costumers happy (Oshie, 2018 and Harrison, 1995). As a bridge between the organisation and its publics, Public Relations' leaders in an organisation articulate policies and strategic plans capable of giving the organisation a green environmental climate which can further strengthen product quality.

In view of the above, Lattimore et al (2004, p.17) agree that;

With monitoring and interpreting skills, practitioners of Public Relations and organisational leaders can assume special responsibilities for helping organizations to establish philosophies, achieve objectives, adapt to changing environments and successful compete in today's market.

Issues Management

Paramount in Public Relations Strategic planning is issues management. Communication is a vital component in every organisation, so it requires a desired attention. In developing economies such as we have in Africa, organisations down-play on professionalism in order to save cost. The interest of the consumers is usually not placed at the fore; as a result, issues are wrongly managed (Oshie, 2015).

Glen & Dozier (2009, p.12) sees issues management as organisation's proactive and systematic approaches to:

- (i) Predict problems
- (ii) Anticipate threats
- (iii) Minimise surprises
- (iv) Resolve issues, and
- (v) Prevent crisis

These all point to the fact that no organisation can survive its communication needs without effective Public Relations Strategic Plans. Of note, is the fact that Public Relations Plans are meant to be assimilated into the organisation's main plan so as to achieve the set goals of the organisation. Issues management in an organisation is a conglomerate of diverse experts ideas fussed into the brain-box of the organisation's general plan for the purpose of achieving collective goal.

Robert, Heath & Michael (2009) identify five basic steps in the process of managing issues, these are;

- (i) **Issues Identification** – where establishing a trend line of courage is important;
- (ii) **Issues Analysis** – where assessment of issues' potential impact on the organization is done.
- (iii) **Strategic options** – Considering what is the appropriate way of handling potentially damaging issues;
- (iv) **Action plan** – communicating a decided policy to all interest publics;
- (v) **Evaluation-** Assessing the results

Public Relations Strategy as Communication Competency

The major characteristic of communication as the sending and receiving of messages cannot be relied on except competency is involved. As stated by Pearson et al (2003, p.28), "Competence is the ability to effectively exchange meaning through a common system of symbols, signs or behaviour". The idea about communication competency bothers on effective message delivery and responses. This, we believe has to do with, especially in organisations, the strategies initiated by experts in communication, who this study refers to as Public Relations managers.

Theoretical Framework

The researchers considered the excellence Theory of Public Relations by James Grunig (2002) as a frame for this work. Grunig's emphasis is on the two-way symmetrical model of communication and Public Relations as a strategic management function. The theory lays credence on employee satisfaction. The author of this theory holds that the best way to achieve employee satisfaction is to engage the employees in a communication system where these employees are put on the know about organisational activities that concern them. Employees show a lot of concern when they know that someone is gathering information about their needs as well as cultivating relationships (Grunig & Dozier, 2002).

The excellence theory seeks an environment where Public Relations practitioners, who work at the strategic management level, can use this environment to build ethical conscience for the organisation. The theory posits that one of the greatest values of Public Relations in strategic management is the information it gathers from the public and makes available into the organisation's decision making

process. Pearberg (2017, p.5) says, “the excellence theory of Public Relations is a fundamental and defining statement about what effective Public Relations is all about”. He cites Grunig (2002), as saying,

Excellence theory of Public Relations traces the origin and continuing development of research tradition that conceptualises Public Relations as a strategic management function, rather than as a messaging, publicity and media relations functions”.

Methodology

This section discusses the procedure which the researchers deemed suitable for this study. This includes the research design, the population of the study, the sample size and the method through which the results were collated. The researchers considered the survey method more appropriate, so it was adopted. Dealing with the entire staff of the Niger Mill Plc, would have been a difficult task, so, the researchers restricted their findings to a sample of 15 workers of the company out of an existing population of about 210.

The instrument adopted for this study was a structural interview. The questions for the interview were simple and straight forward. This was to enable the discussants provide the answers without much stress.

The result of the interview was collated to determine the relationships and the variables emanating from the various opinions of the discussants.

Since the discussants were interviewed with the same set of interview questions, their opinions were summarized under one broad table indicating issues and responses.

Presentation of Results

This study captures Public Relations as a major tool in managing communication in organisations. Niger Flour Mill, one of the flour mills that produce and supply flour products in Calabar and beyond, was used as a case study. The researchers interviewed fifteen staff members of the company out of existing staff strength of about 210. Opinions of these fifteen staff interviewed were believed to represent other workers in the company.

The researchers interviewed the workers individually, and issues raised in this interview were based on the research objectives of this work. The result obtained was analysed as follows:

**Table showing result of discussion with staff of Niger Mill Plc,
Calabar, Cross River State**

Issues	Responses
1. To what extent has the existing Public Relations Strategies of Niger Mill helped in promoting its organisational goals?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Achieved goals are credited generally to the organisational body. ➤ It is difficult to assess if achieved goals are Public Relations efforts.
2. What do you think Niger Mill can do to improve its Public Relations Strategies?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ By creating a special communication channel. ➤ By allowing experts to handle communication matters.
3. How do you assess the relationships between the employees and the management of Niger Mill?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ There is a good relationship. ➤ The management is easily accessed. ➤ Disputes are not allowed to linger.
4. How can you assess the community-related programmes of Niger Mill?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Programmes are people oriented. ➤ Management decide when programmes are to be initiated. ➤ Some programmes are executed in partnership with host communities.
5. How effective is communication between Niger Mill and the Publics?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Niger Mill shares a good communication link with the public. ➤ Few challenges still exist
6. What do you think Niger Mill can do to promote goodwill through communication?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Communication professionals should be engaged. ➤ Company's activities should always be communicated to the public. ➤ The public should be allowed to have an input.
7. How do you assess Niger Mills communication efficiency without in-house Public Relations' department?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Still very challenging ➤ Information meant for the public is sometimes abandoned. ➤ Sometimes sources of information are conflicted.
8. What is your opinion on the establishment of in-house Public Relations department?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ It will be a major step in the direction of effective communication. ➤ It will redirect the communication content of Niger Mill Plc

Source: Field Survey, 2021

Result from the table above was the findings of the researchers' meetings with the employees of Niger Mills Plc. The result explains generally that there were no clear cut organisational goals achieved by Niger Mill Plc. that can be attributed to the company's Public Relations' Strategies. This means that, though the company has achieved a lot of its set goals, these achievements cannot be attributed to the company's Public Relations Strategies.

The discussant also believed that the absence of in-house Public Relations department in the company has adversely affected the communication efficiency of the company. They maintained that, issues of primary concerns are most times delayed because the busy schedule of the managers sometimes affect the time line the information was needed by the public. They believed that if in-house Public Relations department had existed, these lapses would be timely addressed.

Conclusion

Having addressed the research problem of this study as well as reviewing the literature of other communication experts, and justifying the instruments used to arrive at the findings, it becomes necessary to draw a conclusion. In order to communicate effectively in organisations, a need arises that certain Public Relations or communication strategies be put in place. The essence is because, communication in work places and between organisations and their publics has become the wheel that spins organisational activities round (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2005).

The study therefore focused on conceptualising Public Relations basically as a strategic management function instead of playing a simple messaging, publicity and media relations' functions. Responses gathered by those interviewed showed that the company does not operate a functional Public Relations unit, thus, the need for one is necessary.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the researchers recommend as follows:

1. That in-house Public Relations department be established in Niger Mills Plc;
2. That communication activities of the company become the prerogative of Public Relations department;

3. That the management of Niger Mills Plc works in conjunction with the Public Relations department, when established, to promote the communication activities of Niger Mills Plc.

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