

PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES IN THE ADMINISTRATION OF URUE-OFFONG ORUKO LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, AKWA IBOM STATE

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Abstract

This study examined the public relations strategies adopted by Urue Offong/Oruko Local Government Council in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, to foster goodwill with the people of the area. Anchored on the two-way symmetrical communication model, the research employed the survey design. The population was 22, being members of the Executive and Legislative arms of the Council. Data were collected through interview schedule. Findings showed that strategies such as meetings, memos, seminars, workshops, town hall forums, news releases, awards and sponsorship of cultural activities were widely applied. These strategies were perceived as effective in enhancing communication between the council and its publics, particularly in motivating staff and improving goodwill. It was concluded that public relations strategies were integral to effective local government administration. Hence, it was recommended that more innovative, participatory approaches to build stronger trust and responsiveness in governance should be put in place by the Local Government Council.

Introduction

The concept of public relations is one of the fundamental principles in industrial relations, marketing and image building of corporate organisations, government (at all levels) and individual interest. Public relations grew out of necessity: the necessity of building a mutually beneficial relationship between an organisation and the various publics of such organisation. Thus, Igben and Ugbome (2022) defines public relations as the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics. Seitel (2011) sees public relations as “a planned process to influence public opinion, through sound character and proper performance, based on mutually satisfactory two-way communication. Denny Grisworld cited in Irawanto, Saputra, Hidayat and Risal (2022) states that public relations is management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organisation with public interest and executes a programme of action to earn understanding and acceptance. International Public Relations Institute (IPRI), in this regard, offers what is considered all-embracing definition of public relations as 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 opinion about themselves in order to correlate as far as possible their policies

and procedure to achieve by plan and widespread information more efficient fulfilment of their common interest.

Strategy in the context of public relations entails organisational management's deliberate and well planned use of communication activities in the direction that would position the organisation as a credible one and by so doing, enhance both the image/reputation of the organisation before its publics on one hand and its market share on the other hand (Allert and Zawawi, 2004). Public relations strategies are the collection of methods an organisation uses to help it move from its current situation to its end goal which can include gaining publicity, growing its customer base or improving its reputation. Thus, local government administrators can use public relations strategies to position themselves as credible and enhance the image and reputation people have about them.

According to Olabanjo, Odiboh, Nwosu and Ndubueze (2019), Public relations at the local level helps to communicate good administrative performance for public appreciation. However, the government must first do a good job for the people; and thereafter, call attention to it. Olabanjo, *et al.*, explain that it is necessary for local governments to be sound and honest, if they were to earn the people's confidence, respect and support. There cannot be good local government without public awareness of their performance.

Local government system, guaranteed by the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999 as amended), remains one of man's oldest political institutions. The earliest form of local governments existed in the form of clan and village meetings. In fact democracy itself originated and developed along the lines of local governance initiatives in the ancient Greek city states (Sawaneh and Janneh, 2022).

In Nigeria today, there are over 250 ethnic groups with diverse cultures and languages. These ethnic groups are further divided into communities. These communities form the constituents of most local government in Nigeria. By carving out local governments among people of same community, government is preserving such long "traditional association" and using same to foster the interest of the people concerned. It is on this basis that Sawaneh and Janneh (2022) see local government as a system of local administration under local communities that are organised to maintain law and provide some limited range of social amenities. This implies that local government is a political and administrative organ that is empowered by law to administer a specified locality.

It is important to reiterate that local governments (including Urueoffong/Oruko) are created to serve as conduits through which government's policies are communicated to the people. In other words, the creation of local government is intended to bring people of common

heritage or ancestry together as a political unit to further their interest and increase their participation in government business. One of the channels through which people relate with government and vice versa is by communication, aimed at sustaining relationship between people, friends, family, nations, organisations and between government and the people. Public relations, as persuasive communication that can be used to develop and sustain relationship between government (local) and the people. Hence, its acceptance as a management function in the formulation of policy and decision-making. It is a way in which an organisation plays an important role in the administration of local government. Its importance cannot be overemphasised, which is why local governments map out strategies in the administration of the council. Thus, this study examines public relations strategies in the administration of the Urue offong/Oruko local government council.

Statement of the Problem

Public relations plays a crucial role in local government administration. The importance of public relations in maintaining mutual understanding between government and its public, and its role in communicating good administrative performance for public appreciation as well as building beneficial relationship between government and its internal and external publics make public relations vital to local government. This underscores the use of public relations strategies in the administration of local governments.

However, it has been alleged by some stakeholders that many local government councils appear not to make effective use of public relations in the administration of local government councils. Whether or not this is true about Urue offog/Oruko Local Government Council is yet to be ascertained, and it is the motivation for the study. The question is: does Urue Offong/Oruko Local Government apply public relations in the administration of the Council?

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study.

- i. What are the public relations strategies used in the administration of the Urue offong/Oruko Local Government Council?
- ii. How effective are the public relations strategies used in the administration of Urue offong/Oruko Local Government Council?
- iii. Do the public relations strategies used produced the expected outcome in the administration of Urue Offong/Oruko Local Government Council?

Review of Related Literature

Understanding Public Relations

Public relations, in the view of Norman (2015), suggests establishing and maintaining mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics for the purpose of communicating a company's views and objectives while at the same time correcting public reactions. This aligns with Jefkins (2003) who defines public relations as consisting of all forms of planned communication between an organisation and its publics for achieving specific objectives.

From the definitions above, it can be seen that public relations is about creating and maintaining goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics. Thus, it is a management function, which helps to establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and co-operation between an organisation and its publics. Besides, it involves the management of problems and issues that might be relevant to any sector (Ejiofo, Ngong, Chukwuemeka, Chuka, Ugbam and Ibe, 2022). Nwosu (2001) expresses that one major function of public relations is the management of all forms of cooperate information and communications for any organisation. This function includes all types of communications to its internal and external publics. Internally, the public relations members will handle such function as employee communications and organisation communication including grapevine and other informal communication forms.

Although the above definitions range from the simple to the complex, they all point to one direction which Duru, Tahir and Pepple (2025) opine as the deliberate use of organized actions and persuasive communications to influence opinions and actions and, by so doing, secure public sentiment or sympathy in favour of a cause.

According to Tomaš and Stipić (2022), public relations is the propagation of the personality. Similarly, the British institute of Public Relations (IBPR) in Igben and Ugbome (2022) defines it as a deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics. The above two definitions state the importance of communication between an organisation and its publics. Public relations projects the management personality of which the public relations department represents, through their activities with the use of their respective tool or strategy. Thus, public relations is needed in organisations and government (including local government councils

Public Relations Strategies

The word “strategy” is a military term which refers to “the role of a military commander and his art and skill” (Allert and Zawawi, 2004, p.170). Over time, the concept

was imported to management literature to mean a blue print for well-coordinated corporate and planned activities meant to achieve a long term corporate goal. Therefore, strategy, in the context of public relations, entails organisational management's deliberate and well-planned use of communication activities in the direction that would position the organisation as a credible one. By so doing, the image/reputation of the organisation before its publics in one hand and its market share on the other hand are enhanced (Bozkurt, 2018).

By strategies, we are considering plans or a series of actions that are meant to achieve a goal. We consider public relations strategies on the same line as a planned series of public relations actions meant to help an organisation achieve its goals. We cannot but see public relations as an effective service-providing unit in an organisation. Fundamentally, the concept 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 that the public relations unit of the organisation works in conjunction with. Lauren (1995) holds that there is a high need for a mutual understanding amongst the various units of an organisation if the organisation must achieve a complete success. Therefore, public relations' overall plans need to align with the general plans of the organisation, given that this corporate synergy is what the organisation requires to thrive in a competitive environment.

Oshe and Ushie (2021) 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 scholars point out that public relations Strategy means educating management about the value of strategic planning. Generally, public relations Strategy is the summation of an 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, Center and Broom, 2005). Of note is the fact that the management of an organisation draws a long term plan that becomes the blueprint 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.

Thus, Chukwu (2015) states that the task of building good public relations can only be achieved with the use of appropriate tools. These tools, according to the author, among many, are publicity and special events. While publicity gives information about an organisation and its products conveyed to the public by the mass media owing to their newsworthiness, special

events could include courtesy calls on stakeholders and opinion leaders, talk shows, facility visits and sponsorship, all of which create a warm relationship between an organisation or institution with its publics.

Public Relations and Local Government Administration in Nigeria

Public relations in local government administration manifests mostly as community relations because the local government exists in the community and it is the grassroots government. Cutlip, Center and Broom (2000) buttress the point, noting that government public relations activities may be embraced by terms such as public affairs, public information and public communication, which have developed as a political and administrative response to achieving various organisational goals. In effect, citizens need full and accurate information on which to base their daily lives and ultimately assess government records. However, according to Steenmans, Robin, Acuto, Iwaszuk and Garza (2023), the presentation of government information and statistics such as taxation, crime, education, health, construction of roads are often contentious. That is, government claims do not match up to public experience.

Because of people's lack of faith and belief in the government to deliver, government at all levels always canvasses for popular understanding, interest and support for its activities. It is for this reason that public relations is needed in local government administration in Nigeria to garner support for the government. Elaborating on this, Black (2004) opines that local government has a tripartite function, requiring a working partnership between the citizens, elected councillors and permanent officials. Hence, Black argues that public relations provides the most effective means of achieving this co-operation. Governments are known for promise. However, public relations is about performance and recognition, taking its roots from the basic principle of mutual understanding, honesty, and two-way communication. It is, therefore, needed to ensure government's performance even in complex challenges. Cutlip, Centre and Broom (2000) note that as government becomes more complex and ubiquitous, the challenge of making citizens involvement and ensuring that government is responsible to societal needs becomes more difficult.

Strategic planning, in the view of Mavis (2013), is more than a political or public relations tool. It is a comprehensive approach that makes local governments and the public work together regularly to solve community and neighbourhood problems, set priorities, make plans and decision, design, implement programmes and policies, and deliver public services. This partnership works if the local government and the public official who provide them create an environment that invited and enabled citizens to participate. When citizens and local government officials work together to prepare strategic plans, community needs and priorities

are identified; and the local government will be able to design programmes and services that meet the needs of their constituents. Furthermore, the local government has access to community resources, with government managing community conflicts better. This engenders better public support for local government; and long-term community building can be developed; a trusting atmosphere between the local government and the community could be established and a ground for future elected officials could emerge.

Governments are often categorised as democratic based upon free and fair elections. In line with this view, Black (2004) observes that democracy cannot function properly without good public relations. To the author, the electorate requires knowledge on how government functions, information on decision-making, and education in order to take full advantage of the facilities and services provided. There is clearly need for public relations activities to help citizens understand their privileges and responsibilities under a democratic form of government. Black (2004), therefore, highlights the functions of public relations in local government to include keeping the citizens informed of the council policy and its day to-day activities. It also involves giving citizens an opportunity of expressing ideas on important new projects before final decisions are taken by the council; enlightening citizens on the way in which the system of local government works, and to inform them (citizen) of their rights and responsibilities; and finally promoting a sense of civic pride.

Theoretical Framework

Two-Way Symmetrical Model

The Two-way Symmetric Theory of public relations was propounded by Grunig and Hurt in 1984. The theory, according to Nwosu (2006), anchors on a two-way communication mechanism with emphasis on using public relations to bring an organisation and its publics together through a mutually two-way beneficial communication. This theory posits that effective positive exchange will be of great benefit to all.

The two-way symmetric model, according to Kent and Lane (2021), describes public relations effort in terms of research based description as the use of communication in improving understanding with strategic publics. Under this model, the communication objective is to achieve a true mutual understanding that satisfies the mutual interests of both the organisation and its publics. Two-way symmetrical model emphasises on dialogue, complete and accurate two-way communication; the main purpose is to promote mutual understanding between organisations and their publics.

The utilisation of two-way symmetrical model in PR enables the public to have a voice at the official table. This model makes it possible for exchange and shared comprehension to

occur between the association and its publics. The theory is relevant to this study because the local government is an integral part of the social system that cannot do without public relations strategies if they want to ensure effective administration. This theory accommodates dialogue and communication as part of PR strategies for effective administration.

Methodology

The research design for this study was the survey. The population was 22, made up of the executive and legislative members of Urue Offong/Oruko Local Government Council. Executive members were 12 while the Legislative members (Councillors) were 10. The study adopted the purposive sampling technique to select only those who were relevant to the study at hand. Thus, the Vice Chairman, Head of Service, Information Officer and Leader of the Legislative were selected. The instrument for data collection was the interview schedule which was validated by communication research experts in the Faculty of Communication and Media Studies. The interview schedule bordered on the three research questions posed in the study.

Results and Discussion of Findings

Research Question One: What are the public relations strategies used in the administration of the Urue Offong/Oruko Local Government Council?

Data gathered indicated that the public relations strategies adopted by Urue Offong/Oruko Local Government Council were seminars/workshops, town hall meetings with the locals, issuing of press releases, sponsorship of community and cultural activities, sponsorship of sports and recreational activities as well as recognition/awards. And the most frequent means of information dissemination by the Council was face-to-face meetings, letters, text messages and social media.

The principal officers of the council interviewed corroborated this. The Vice Chairman, the Head of Service, Leader of the House and the Information Officer held that the Council made use of meetings, letters/memos, press release, two hall meeting, and sponsorship of cultural activities as the public relations strategies used in the administration of the internal and external publics of the council. They also stated that there was a system of reward and recognition for the staff as part of the public relations strategies used for the internal public of the Council. This means that in Urue offong/Oruko Local Government Council applies different public relations strategies in the administration of the Council.

The use of meeting as the dominant PR strategy supports the reports given by the Principal Officers of the Council interviewed on the communication flow that best characterise Urue offong/Oruko Local Government Council. The Leader of the House and the Information Officer said that upward communication flow which involves communication flow from

subordinate staff to their superiors or top management team best described the communication flow in the council. The position was corroborated by the Vice Chairman and the Head of Service but also submitted that the management makes use of any type of communication depending on the situation. He said that although upward communication best described the communication flow in the council, the council still utilized downward and horizontal communication as the situation demanded.

Commenting on the role of public relations strategies in an organisation, local governments inclusive, Lauren (1995) holds that it is vital, for there is a high need of a mutual understanding amongst unit of an organisation if the organisation must achieve a complete success. So, local governments including Urue offong/Oruko make use of public relations strategies to maintain mutual relations and understanding with the publics' of the council, and this will give a voice to the publics pertaining the administration of the council, thus encouraging two-way communication. The utilisation of the two-way symmetrical model of communication by the local government through the PR strategies will enable the public to have a voice at the official table which will promote mutual understanding between the management of the local government and its public. According to Nwosu (2006), the two-way symmetrical model anchors in a two-way communication mechanism which has its emphasis on using public relations to bring an organisation and its public together through a mutually two-way beneficial communication. These strategies employed by Urue offong/Oruko Local Government Council will also help the organisation to build bridges between the council and its various internal and external publics to achieve the desired goodwill, understanding and good image, thus, aligning with the Relationship Theory used in this study.

Research Question Two: How effective are the public relations strategies used in the administration of Council?

Responses showed that public relations strategies used by the management in the administration of the council were effective. The Principal Officers of the council were of the opinion that the effectiveness of the strategies highly - 75% and 70% respectively. The effectiveness was evidenced by friendly quality responses and cooperation between the management of the council and its publics.

The finding of this research question implies that while the public relations strategies used in the administration of the council were effective to the publics of the Council. This finding varies with those of Onojeghwo (2013) who carried out a study on public relations practice in selected local governments in South-South, Nigeria. The findings showed that while

public relations department existed in many Local Government Councils in South-South, Nigeria, the public relations practice in the Councils were not seen as effective.

The communication climate is probably why the respondents rated the PR strategies as effective. O'Reilly and Chairman (2013) corroborate this, by stating that the communication climate that exists in an organisation is crucial factor in determining the extent to which the employees of the organisation will understand, identify and appreciate the goals the organisation sets to accomplish. Part of organisational goals is to maintain mutual understanding, goodwill and favourable image with its various publics. Thus, the approaches adopted in dealing with the people, will to a great extent, determine how the public will see the organisation.

Research Question Three: Do the Public Relations Strategies used by Urue Offong/Oruko Local Government Council produce the expected outcome in the administration of the Council?

Data indicate that the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that mutual understanding existed between the management and employees of the Urue offong/Oruko Local Government, and expressed happiness over the relationship that existed between the management and the employees of the Council as result of the PR strategies adopted by the administration of the Council. Respondents indicated that the PR strategies used by the management of Urue offong/Oruko Local Government had helped in the administration of the council in the following ways: healthy employee relations with the management; bringing about efficiency; workers are motivated to work; and healthy relationship with the people of the Council. The respondents all agreed that mutual understanding existed between the staff/internal public and the management of the council, and that employee are motivated to work. To the external public, they added that the PR strategies have earned them goodwill among the people (external public) of the Council. The implication of the finding is that the public relations strategies used have produced the expected outcome of manifesting goodwill and mutual understanding between the Local Government Council and its publics.

The findings of this study, however, is not in agreement with that of Onejehwo (2013) who carried out a study on public relations practice in selected local governments in south-south, Nigeria. Contrary to the finding of this research question, the research found that the practice of public relations in the selected local governments had not produced the required outcome as the public perceived the local government administration as not being responsive and proactive in their PR practice.

Summary of Findings

Based on the data collected presented and analysed in the chapter four of this study, the following major findings were made:

- i. The most significant public relations strategy used in the administration of the Council were regular meetings with staff and town hall meetings with the community.
- ii. While the public relations strategies used in the administration of Urue offong/Oruko Local Government Council was highly effective for the internal publics.
- iii. The public relations strategies used have produced the expected outcome of mobilisation, support for government and collaboration for development

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it is concluded that there is a high utilisation of public relations strategies in the administration of the Urue offong/Oruko Local Government Council. It is also concluded that there is a high level of mutual understanding between the council executive, legislature and staff of the Urue offong/Oruko Local Government Council.

Recommendations

From the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Urue offong/Oruko Local Government Council should from time to time audit the opinions of its publics to ascertain the strength and weaknesses of the strategies used in relationship building.
2. The management team of the council should endeavour to sustain and improve on the strategies used, introduce new strategies if necessary to sustain internal harmony.
3. Despite the positive outcome of the public relation strategies on the internal public, management of Urue offong/Oruko should sustain the momentum by improving and increasing public relations strategies and activities. This can be done by making employees key drivers of the strategies through inclusiveness and allowing participatory governance.

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