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PUBLIC RELATIONS EVENTS AND FUND GENERATION FOR NIGERIAN
TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

BY

EMEKA J. OKEREKE

ABSTRACT

Nigerian tertiary institutions are recently finding it impossible to implement their plans towards achieving set objectives. This is because of lack of funds which renders their operations ineffective. Consequently, National Universities Commission (NUC) has mandated them to look for other sources of funds to supplement subvention from government. Public Relations Unit has been identified as one of such sources and in this direction the public relations officer is seen as a financial manager. This paper has therefore x-rayed the possible sources of generating funds for Nigerian tertiary institutions by PROs through their numerous activities (events) and ways of ensuring the judicious utilization of the funds so realised.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is worried about the effective performance of Public Relations Practitioners in Nigerian tertiary institutions especially in the wake of frequent policy and structural changes. The Public Relations Officer, as an 'outside eye' of the institution and a service aid to management, is operating in a rapidly changing environment and this should, as a matter of reality, make him to see his functions/activities beyond the scope of his conventional area of coverage.

Essentially, tertiary institutions, in the context of this paper, are those academic establishments that fall in the third order of our national educational ranking, usually preceded by the primary and secondary school levels. They include colleges of education and agriculture with the Provost as the Chief Executives, the polytechnics headed by the Rectors, and the Universities with Vice-Chancellors as their Chief Executives and academic officers. The college of education or agriculture and polytechnics are designed to produce the level manpower (Diplomas) whereas the Universities are fashioned to

encourage the advancement of learning and to hold out to all persons without distinction or race, creed, sex or political conviction, the opportunity of acquiring a higher education.

2. Develop and offer academic and professional programmes leading to the award of Diplomas, First degrees, postgraduate research and higher degrees which emphasize planning, adaptive, technical, maintenance, developmental and productive skills in one or combinations of areas of education, linguistics, science, agriculture, medicine, engineering and allied professional disciplines with the capability to understand, develop new knowledge or know-how for the benefit of mankind (Okereke, C. D. 1995: 20).

The Public Relations Officer has a significant role to play in the attainment of these objectives by engaging in activities which revolve corporate relations, government relations, community relations, media relations, financial public relations, international public relations, employee communication and marketing support. The present day Public Relations Officers in Nigerian tertiary institutions should see their activities beyond these lists. They should be thinking on how to assist the institution generate and manage funds for its effective operation, especially now that the cost of running tertiary institutions is geometrically increasing while monthly, quarterly or yearly subvention from the State or Federal Governments is arithmetically increasing making it grossly inadequate and impossible for the implementation of laid down plans. This paper will x-ray the possible sources of generating fund for the institution by PROs through their numerous activities (events), ways of ensuring the judicious utilization of funds so realised.

Public Relations: An Overview

Public Relations means a number of things to many people. Some see it as lobbying or propaganda. Others see it as publicity, advertising or a press agency. This is very myopic and a misconception of true meaning of public relations. Webster dictionary defines public relations as:

- (i) the promotion of report and goodwill between a person, firm or institution and other persons, specially publics or the community at large through the distribution of interpretative material, the development of neighbourly interchange, and the assessment of public reaction.
- (ii) The degree of understanding and goodwill achieved between an individual, organisation, or institution and the public.
- (iii) The art or science of developing reciprocal understanding and goodwill.

It can also be defined as a distinctive management function which helps to establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and co-operation between an organisation and its publics. It is both science and art requiring conscientious application of knowledge, skill, dynamism and objectivity. Other definitions of the relations is defined as an indispensable management function that ensures the maintenance of mutual understanding and goodwill between the institution and its publics as well as the growth and achieving of organisational goals through its material (monetary) contributions. This definition makes public relations not only an image-making arm of tertiary institutions but also a revenue generating arm. Some practitioners may not read meaning into this definition because of their inability to explore and utilize effectively the public relations tools. As Henkin (1981: 10) put it;

"Public Relations techniques have been used for centuries in a variety of forms and circumstances. When used wisely, these techniques have generally yielded favourable results. Today, public Relations has come of age as a profession and is recognized as an essential part of our economy and our way of life".

Fundamentally, change is the only thing that is constant in our daily lives. From all perspectives, mankind has been propelled into an era of high technology, extreme specialization, rapid mobility, mass production and sophisticated communication network. Leshy (1978:vii) argues that

"the vast and rapid changes of recent years have had an even greater impact in human affairs than in science and technology . . . All institutions and elements of society are interlinked; as each changes, it wreaks changes on others. The whole human spectrum is therefore an Over-changing shape."

Practitioners should therefore see this new dimension in the field of Public Relations as a change which has been identified as being responsible for man's progress in all directions.

Be this as it may, the first cardinal point of PR is the fact that the general good must be served, and this can be done by making available to the public at all times the facts and interpretations of events behind the scenes in the language they can understand. The second lies in the Acknowledgment of the fact that whatever is not in public interest is an unworthy cause, and cannot be defended by PR. In other words, PR cannot defend the indefensible, and favourable public opinion can be maintained only if deserved, while white-washing of any situation is the very antithesis of PR. Prestige and public goodwill are the most valuable assets of any institution or organisation and funds generation efforts of the PROs do not in any way deviate from achieving these standards.

It has to be pointed out here that a distinction should be made between public relations *per se* and public relations administration. If an institution is aware of the importance of its publics' opinions and develops a positive programme intended to influence these publics intelligently and constructively, it has public relations administration. The fact that one is designated as a Public Relations Officer suggests that Nigerian tertiary institutions have public relations administration. However, the operation (PR admin.) has proved difficult because of the presence of diverse publics. Operationally, students represent one of the major publics of tertiary institutions PR. Other publics are the staff who administer the affairs of the students, the community in which the institution is located, the financial institution(s) that keep custody of the finances, contractors who are registered with the institution, the press, the supervising government body like the National Universities Commission for Universities and the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) for the polytechnics, the government (state or federal) that finances it, the governing council and the miscellaneous public whose interaction with the institution is on a transient basis.

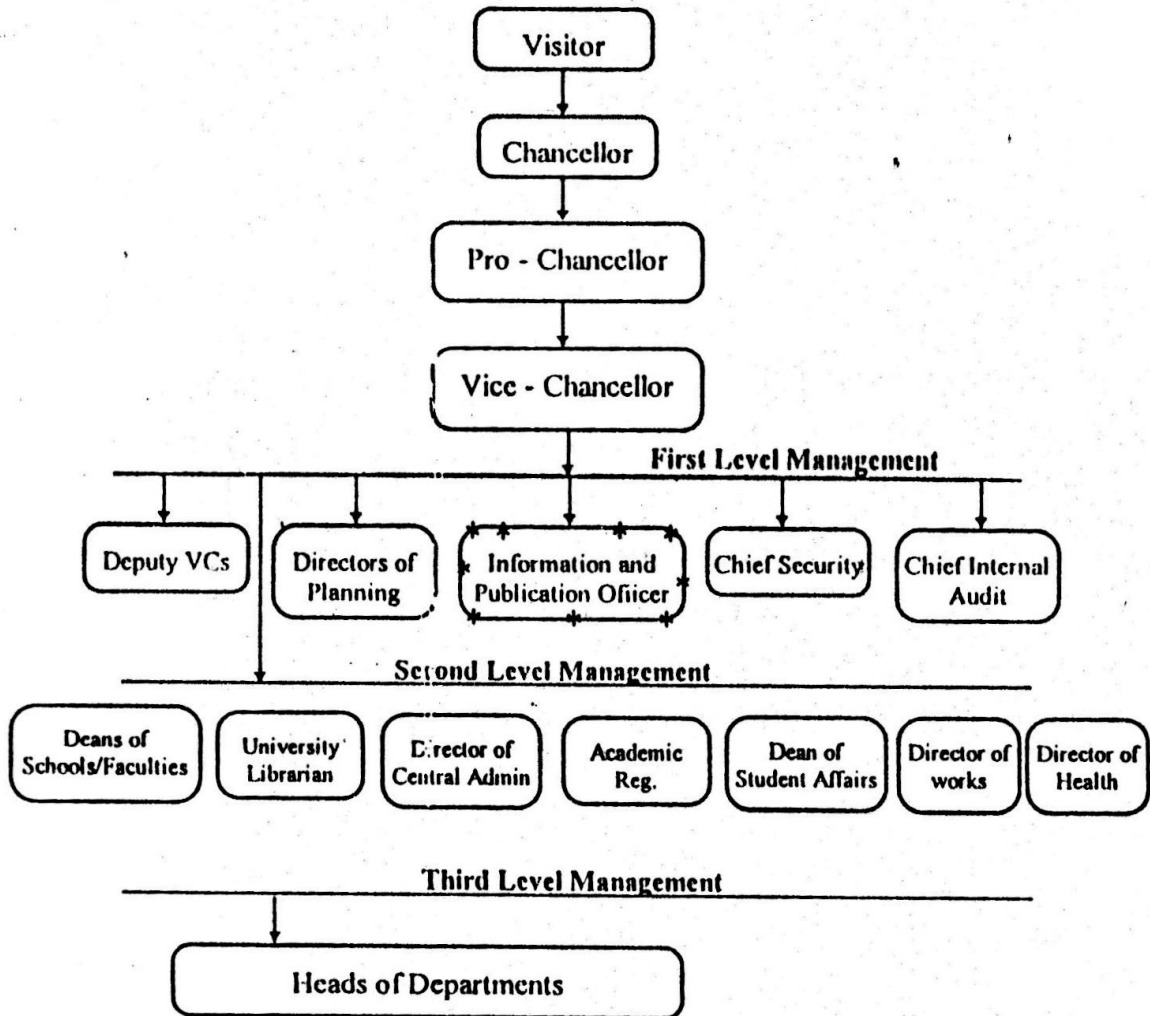
It is the responsibility of the PRO in conjunction with any other arm or committee set up to deal with matters relating to any of the above politics, to ensure that there is sustained goodwill and understanding through the adoption of the PR ACTION PROCESS between the institution and its publics. The action process, which is the steps involved in carrying out PR programme, (the Race Model) does not only involve a vertical information flow but also a horizontal information network professionally woven and

complemented with dynamic human relations approach. The PR Action Process involves Research, Action (plan), Communication and Evaluation. Thus, PR today involves complete analysis and understanding of all factors that influence people's attitudes toward the institution. They include analyzing the general climate of attitudes and the relation of the institution to its 'universe,' determining the attitude of any group toward the institution or organisation, analysing the state of opinion, anticipating potential problems, needs, and opportunities, formulating potential problems, needs, and opportunities, formulating policy, planning means of improving the attitude of a group, carrying out the planned activities; and feedback, evaluation and adjustment.

The Place of PROs in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

The place of PROs in Nigerian tertiary institutions is better appreciated by looking at their position in the institutions' organogrammes. Organisational structure of a typical institution is shown in figure 1 below:

Fig. 1: Officers of the University and the position of the PROs.



Source: Okereke, C. D. Workshop Paper, Modotel, Owerri, April 1995.

From the organisational chart, we see that the Public Relations Officer is a first level management staff reporting directly to the University's Chief Executive. This arrangement is applicable in Colleges of Education, Polytechnic and other related institutions.

Requirements of PR

Five essential requirements of PR can be identified as follows:

- a. the need to ensure that the message is beamed to the right targeted public(s);
- b. the need to ensure that the most appropriate type of media is used for conveying the message;
- c. the need to ensure that there is a carefully planned programme spelling out what is to be done and how; when to do it and by who;
- d. the need to ensure that the whole programme is characterised by an all-embracing theme flowing through each activity;
- e. the need to ensure the achievement of corporate objective(s) of the institution or organisation.

Responsibilities of a PR Practitioner

In carrying out a number of PR events, PROs are responsible for the following:

- a. to keep management or clients informed of public opinion and of events and trends likely to affect their reputation;
- b. to advise management or clients on policies and actions that should be adopted in order to gain recognition, acceptance and goodwill, also the likely effect which certain policies and actions are likely to have in terms of public reactions;
- c. to use specialized techniques to solve problems affecting the organization's reputation.
- d. to maintain a continuing positive programme of action to secure the necessary goodwill and understanding;
- e. to undertake the production of press release, publications and visual aids needed to project a good image of the organisation; also to organise other activities such as visits, open houses, or special ceremonies calculated to give greater insight into the operations of the organisation;
- f. to maintain constant and effective relationship with the press, radio and TV
- g. to handle complaints from the public and assist with the handling of industrial relations within the institution;
- h. from time to time, to initiate actions as follows:
 - (i) Conduct communication audits to find, for example whether people know and understand what the institution is up to;
 - (ii) Study the attitudes of selected groups of people, their behaviour and expectations with a view to finding out what they really think of the management of the institution and the institution as a whole.

- (iii) Carry out image studies to determine how the institution's rates compare with competitors, and to ensure that those who represent the organisation in public are not damaging its image;
- (iv) Assess the impact which the environmental, political, economic and social changes have or likely to have on the operations of the institution;
- (v) Keep an up-to-date register of vital contacts which should be revised at least once a quarter.

Public Relations Officers As Financial Managers

Public Relations Officers roles as financial managers are somehow, imbedded in the responsibilities listed above. Unfortunately, they have not come out openly to assume that position either because of mere ignorance or lack of encouragement from management. Whatever is responsible, they should always see themselves not only as Image Managers but also as Financial Managers especially in carrying out their multi-dimensional PR events. As a financial manager, he/she is partly entrusted with the institutions sources and application of funds. He ensures that funds are sourced at the "least cost with maximum benefit and judiciously applied. He initiates revenue generating ideas and carries them out while at the same time achieving his image-making objective. He ensures that the fund so generated is allocated to their various uses. In this case, he is a Fund Allocator. However, there is limit to which he can perform this function. Basically, if the available funds are not within the vote of his unit, his status as a manager and role changes to an advisory one. In which case, instead of allocating funds, himself, he advises management of the institution on the best course of action for an efficient allocation points.

Essentially, PROs can generate revenue for the institutions through a number of PR events, namely;

1. floating of workshops, seminars and conferences;
2. Organisation of launchings;
3. Organisation of sponsored dinners;
4. Organization of beauty contests in the institution;
5. Packaging Raffle Draws;
6. Sale of News Bulletins;
7. floating of the institutions friends club;
8. Sale of academic programme to the institution for example, mass communication;
9. Consultancy services.

To achieve these, the PR man must be properly equipped. Such equipment will both come from him as a person and the institution. In equipping himself, he must possess, among other qualities, the following:

- i. good judgement and capacity for orderliness and reasoning;
- ii. writing and speaking capabilities;
- iii. objectivity
- iv. creativity: Creativity is something that few people know much about. Most people simply have an idea about something. Some are better at producing ideas than others and there seems to be a link between input and output. A man with many interests and liberal outlook, who has a great knowledge of

men and affairs is more likely to produce ideas of value in PR work than a narrow-minded and cantankerous old hermit or a young whizz-kid with academic qualification but little experience of the world.

- v. a thorough knowledge of all the types of communication media - how they work, their needs, their specialities and their standards;
- vi. energy and courage;
- ii. salesmanship quality;
- ii. versatility, resourcefulness and resistance;
- ix. Patience, tact, diplomacy, adaptability and integrity.
- x. smart appearance;
- xi. Ability to exhibit professionalism

On the part of the institution, the PRO should be provided with a good working environment conducive enough for effective performance. Basically, the PR man must be provided with a benefiting office that would accommodate the office staff and decently furnished to give every visitor or staff a conducive atmosphere for dialogue and to further place him in a favourable position to influence others through persuasion. The office, apart from having competent support staff, should have necessary facilities such as refrigerator, information board, inter and intra-communication equipment, varied publications, audio-visual facility for recording important events; typing, duplicating, the photocopying equipment. To meet with the frequent runs associated with the office, a car should be attached to him and finally special entertainment and dressing allowances should be approved. The provision of these facilities depends on how productive the man in the office is and how tactical and diplomatic he is in putting across his proposals to management. Generally, the trend in the provision of working facilities for the PROs is not in any way encouraging and need to be revisited for effective performance.

CONCLUSION

The complexity of the operational environment of Public Relations Officers in tertiary institutions is quite obvious. It has obviously put them into greater challenges. It requires an exceptionally minded PR man to cope with the demands of the job. The best and sure outlet is to integrate the neglected financing role to their conventional role of image making. How to start is to begin.

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