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Public Relations Research: An Imperative for Public Relations Practitioners.

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Abstract

This paper titled public relations research: An imperative for public relations practitioners" discusses the various methods of research used in solving organizational problems by public relations practitioners. It x-rayed the role of public relations research, its' importance, types, methods, procedures and problems encountered in carrying out research by public relations practitioners. The paper asserts that due to the paramount importance of research in carrying out public relations programs that public relations practitioners should be well trained and proficient in research studies. In this regard, it is recommended that management of organizations should employ public relations practitioners that have the pre-requisite experience to tackle organization's problems through research.

Key words: Public Relations, Research, Imperative and Public Relations Practitioners.

Introduction

The imperative of research in public relations practice cannot be over emphasized as it is employed in actualizing organizational goals and objectives which is accomplished through the application of research in its programs and activities. Research ensures that an organization analyzes trends, predicts their consequences, counsel organization

leaders and implements planned programs of actions which will serve both the organization and the public interest. As public relations practitioners embark on research activities they in no small measure help in accomplishing the management function that identifies, establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationship between an organization and the various publics on whom her success or failure depends. From the foregoing, it is glaring that public relations activities are not haphazardly implemented but rather organized, planned, programmed and evaluated. By analyzing trends, implies the application of research which leads to the prediction of would be consequences that can be either favorable or unfavorable to an organization.

Consenting, the 1978 Mexican Statement according to Nwosu (2011, p.151) sees public relations as "the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organization leaders and implementing planned programs of actions which will serve both the organization and the public interest". From this definition it is glaring that public relations activities are not haphazardly conducted and implemented as they are anchored on research.

An American Sociologist, Earl Robert Babbie says research is a systematic inquiry to describe, explain, predict and control the observed phenomenon. He asserts that research involves inductive and deductive methods. Inductive research methods is used to analyze the observed phenomenon whereas,

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deductive research method is used to verify the observed phenomenon. While inductive is associated with qualitative research, deductive research is associated with quantitative research, deductive research is associated with quantitative research (<http://www.questionpro.com/blog/whati-si-research.>)

Furthermore, (<https://real.ucsd.edu/unused20pages/what-is-research/html>) sees research as systematic gathering of data and information and its analysis for advancement of knowledge in any subject. We define research as a concerted effort to gather, analyze and manage information on a given phenomenon with the aim of finding a solution to the identified problem.

To ensure efficiency in research, the US based Institute for Public Relations Research and Education advocated for the following guidelines for public relations research. Establishing clear public relations objectives and desired outcomes tied directly to business goals; Differentiating between measuring Public Relations “outputs”, usually short term objectives (e.g. amount of press coverage received or exposure to a particular message) and Public Relations “outcomes” usually long term objectives (e.g. changing awareness, attitudes and behavior); Understanding that no one technique can be expected to effectively evaluate Public Relations effectiveness; Being wary of attempts to compare Public Relations effectiveness with advertising effectiveness; Public Relations evaluation cannot be accomplished in isolation. It must be linked with the overall business goals, strategies and tactics. (Wilson, Esiri, and Onwubere 2008).

Role of Public Relations Research in an Organization

The role public relations play is central to the overall success of an organization. It is the compass that determines the way-forward. According to Abugu (2007) as cited in

Ogbemi (2011, P.198): It aids an organization to monitor trends in the environment of practice and to determine the direction and status of public opinion, gives target publics the opportunity to interact or inform management on their beliefs, opinion as well as attitudes; assists the organization to identify, understand, interpret, and analyze problems and proffer solutions; helps to reveal timely, trouble areas to organizations before they define themselves or manifest into crisis and thus weigh the organization down; eliminates guess work, anti-public communication and apportions organizations resources to proper areas, provides ways of improving the services of an organization to its publics through correction of identified problems; reveals the organization's strength, weaknesses, opportunities and threats; constitutes a strong weapon for an organization to gain a competitive advantage; reveals public opinion to management for its consideration as input into policy formulation; elicits feedback and as such actualizes the two-way communication concept, which assists in the area of effectiveness; reveals cultural differences and value systems obtainable in the environment of practice.

Importance of Research

The essence of carrying out research in public relations is to identify the problem, the publics involved, to set objectives, choose the media that will be used to reach the affected publics or audience; to properly plan the budget that is to be used in executing the programme and programme monitoring and evaluation.

According to Wimmer & Dominick (1987, p.314) public relations research is used to gather data on audience attitudes and opinions, as means of surveillance... (Many

companies and organizations have public relations departments that systematically scan the environment in order to keep abreast of changes in society that might cause short term or long term problems.), to secure management support for their own functions, politics, recommendations and so forth. In many organizations, the marketing, financial and production departments are the ones that can most effectively influence the decision making process. Also, it is often conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of a planned communication program through pretest/post test result on message research which is appropriate to gauging the results of a public relations campaign.

Types of Public Relations Research

In Public Relations several types of research have been postulated by different authors. Wilson, Esiri and Onwubere (2008) in their work titled "Communication Research" identified the following types of public relations research:

Environmental Scanning or Trend Analysis: This type or category of Public Relations research involves finding out the major political, economic, social, technological, legal, cultural issues including public opinion and social events that are most likely to affect the operations, existence, success, survival, profitability and growth of an organization. This type of research is important because the Public Relations executive has to continually inform and advise management on the trends and issues using data generated through this type of research.

Strategic Research: This type of research is used primarily in Public Relations program development to determine program objectives, develop message strategies or establish benchmarks

or standards. It often examines the tools and techniques of Public Relations.

For instance an organization that wants to know how employees rate its can-dour in internal publications would first conduct strategic research to find out where it stands.

Attitude Research: This type of research measures and interprets a full range of views, sentiments, feelings, opinions and beliefs that segments of the public may hold towards an organization or its products.

Image Research: This category of research also referred to as reputation research systematically studies people's perceptions toward an organization, individual, product or service. Image research determines the institutional profile or corporate image in the public's mind by ascertaining the perception of the public towards an organization; how well they understand it, and what they like and dislike about it. Furthermore, it seeks to find out how well a company or an organization is known, its reputation and what the public thinks about its employees, products, services and practices.

Cyber Image Analysis: This is the measurement of internet content via chat rooms or discussion groups in cyberspace regarding an organization or product. It is also the measurement of a client's image everywhere on the internet.

Other types of research in public relations are:

Monitoring Research: This research method entails ascertaining the rate of success achieved when a public relations programme is on course. It reveals the areas of strength and weaknesses and proffers the way-forward.

Media Research: For public relations programme to be effective the medium or media of communication that will be used to disseminate information to the target publics should be evaluated to ascertain the reach, cost, franchise position and the time of broadcast or publication.

Evaluation Research: To evaluate deals with finding out the extent of progress made taking cognizance of the goals and objectives set before the commencement of the research. It unveils the road map that needs to be adopted to ensure the desired success.

Communication Audit: This is used in finding out whether the message disseminated to the target audience actually got to them. The communication tools that can be audited include newsletters, annual reports, brochures, press materials, web sites, and video programs.

Social Audits: This evaluates an organization's corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities, such as community relations, education, sponsorship, corporate philanthropy and environmental, programmes. It measures the awareness of these programs and how the organization is perceived by her publics with regards to accomplishing corporate social responsibility.

The Public Relations Audit: It shows the various images held by the publics of an organization. Also, it depicts the rate of awareness created by an organization with relation to her products, services, logos and slogans. Public relations audits can reveal the misperceptions held against the organization and the way the organization is actually perceived by the key publics.

According to Idemili (1990, p.226) public relations research involves much more than finding out what the public thinks about a company, industry or a profession. It involves public opinion research which includes the following:

- a. **Image Surveys:** Image surveys determine the institutional profile or corporate image in the public mind by ascertaining the attitudes of the public towards an organization, how well they understand it, and what they like and dislike about it.
- b. **Motivation Research:** Motivation research ascertains why the public looks with favor or disapproval upon a company or industry. It seeks to discover through depth interviews with a representative sample of the population, what motivates the public attitudes towards an organization.
- c. **Effectiveness Survey:** Effectiveness survey is used to measure the impact on public opinion made by a company's public relations activities... Before the start of a campaign, a representative sample of the public is interviewed to determine public attitudes and the extent of public knowledge of the company or industry.

Methods of Public Relations Research

There are several methods used in conducting Public Relations research can be categorized as primary, secondary and informal research methods.

Primary Research. The primary research methods include surveys and interviews.

Surveys: Survey research according to Sietel (2001:110) is one of the most frequently used research methods in Public Relations. Survey can be applied to broad societal issues, such as determining public opinion about an organization, or to the minute organizational problem, such as whether shareholders like the annual report or not. Public Relations Surveys come in three types; the descriptive, explanatory and panel studies. **Descriptive Surveys:** It offers a snapshot of a current situation or condition. They are the research equivalent of a balance sheet, capturing reality at a specific point in time. A typical public opinion poll is a prime example.

Explanatory Surveys: They are concerned with cause and effect. Their purpose is to help explain why a current situation or condition exists and to offer explanations for opinions and attitudes. Frequently, such explanatory or analytical surveys are designed to answer the question "Why?" Why are our philanthropic efforts not being appreciated in the community? Why don't employees believe management's messages? Why is our credibility being questioned?

Panel Studies: This is a type of survey whereby the same sample of respondents is measured at different points in time. With this technique a sample of respondents is selected and interviewed and then re-interviewed and studied at later times. This technique enables the researcher to study changes in behaviors and attitudes.

Interviews

The interview has been defined by Berger (2000) in Wilson, Esiri and Onwubere (2008, p.242) as a "conversation between a researcher (someone who wishes to gain information about a subject) and an informant (someone

presumably has information on the subject). Interviews can provide a more personal, firsthand feel for public opinion. Interviews can be conducted in a number of ways. These include face to face (interview panels), telephone, mail (by post) and through the internet.” The different interview panels include the following:

Focus Group Discussion (FGD). This approach, simply referred to as Focus Groups, is used with increasing frequency in Public Relations. Also known as group interviewing, this technique involves a moderator leading a group usually between 6 – 12 through a discussion of opinions on a particular subject such as opinions on a particular subject, organization or product. Participants represent the socioeconomic level desired by the researcher – from students, housewives, office workers to millionaires. Participants are normally paid for their efforts. Sessions are frequently recorded and then analyzed, often in preparation for more specific research questionnaires.

In-depth (Intensive) Interview. In-depth or intensive interview is a hybrid of the one-on-one interview in which a respondent is invited to a field service location or a research office for an interview. The goal of this kind of interview is to deeply explore the respondent’s point of view, feelings and perspective. In-depth involves not only asking questions, but the systematic recording and documenting of responses coupled with intensive probing for deeper meaning and understanding of the responses. It requires repeated interview sessions with the target audience under study.

Drop-off interviews. This approach combines face-to-face and mail interview techniques. An interviewer personally drops off a questionnaire at a household, usually after conducting a face-

to-face interview. Because the interviewer has already established some rapport with the interviewee, the rate of return or response rate with this technique is considerably higher than it is for straight mail interviews.

Delphi panels. The Delphi technique is a more qualitative research tool that uses opinion leaders – local influential persons as well as national experts – often to help tailor the design of a general public research survey. Designed by the Rand Corporation in the 1950s, the Delphi technique is a consensus-building approach that relies on repeated waves of questionnaires sent to the same select panel of experts. Delphi findings generate a wide range of responses and help set the agenda for more meaningful future research. Stated another way, Delphi panels offer a “research reality check”. Other interview methods are internet, telephone and mail.

Secondary Research. This method include desk research, content analysis and tracking studies.

Desk Research: This consists of the study of existing or published data or documented materials. These include files, reports and other such materials that exist within and outside the organization. It also includes reference books like encyclopedia, “who is who”, publication, technical and professional books related to Public Relations and other such published materials. In addition, periodicals like newspapers, magazines, professional journals, academic journals come very handy in desk research or secondary data collection.

Content Analysis: According to Stacks (2005, p.189) content analysis is used quite extensively in Public Relations evaluation to better understand messages and how key publics react to those messages. Content analysis is a research

technique that shows the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication. Content analysis is utilized when the researcher intends to examine data contained in mass media content that are crucial to his study. (Berelson, 1952)

Tracking Studies: This is a special readership measurement technique in which respondents designate public relations material they have read.

Informal Research Methods.

Informal research methods include personal contacts, expert opinions, community forums, call-in telephone lines, mail analysis and examination of media contents etc.

Research Procedure

To effectively carry out research the following steps should be considered, situation analysis / problem definition, objective of the study, research question, literature review, definition of key concepts/ terms, scope of study; population definition, methods of data collection, designing and administration of research instrument, collation and analysis of data, conclusion and recommendation.

Problems of Public Relations Research

Despite the various advantages of research in public relations, it is noteworthy to acquaint PR practitioners with the fact that there exists some inherent problems and limitations of research in public relations practice. Oyeneye (2007) cited in Ogbiten (2012, p.201) identifies the problems as follows:

Cost of Research: Public relations research involves a lot of money which some organizations might not be willing to release for such purposes. Some other organizations might not be big enough or financially strong to sponsor such a research.

Practitioners Lack of Research Knowledge: This occurs more in organizations that do not employ qualified public relations practitioners. Such persons might not have the knowledge of how to carry out research.

Manpower Problem: Some internal public relations departments do not have enough manpower to carry out research.

High level of Illiteracy: In areas where the publics of the organization are mostly illiterate, carrying out research will be very difficult. This problem can be solved by applying research methods that require interviewing them in the language they understand.

Religious and Cultural Values: The beliefs of the people and their religious attitudes can be a problem, take for instance in the Northern Nigeria it is difficult to get women interviewed because they are not allowed to interact with the public except their husbands.

Managements Faults: The management of some organizations might ignorantly think that spending money for public relations research is a waste hence it becomes a problem to carry out public relations research.

Time lag: When too much time is wasted in embarking on a research project, the result might not be the true reflection of the situation. This happens when management delays in

releasing money for research or when the concerned publics is not cooperating with the researcher.

Qualities for Effective Research: For public relations research to be effective public relations practitioners must have communication skills - both written and spoken, analytical, editing and interviewing skills. They are required to be sociable, have good understanding of people and human psychology; properly acquaint himself or herself with the knowledge of his or her organization; should have creative imaginative ability; be able to adapt easily and have interpretative and evaluative skills.

Conclusion

As earlier stated, research is central in public relations practice because every public relations activity involves one type of research or the other. Research finds expression in image and crisis management, publics' identification, public relations process and the application of models of public relations in solving public relations problems. Some of the mostly used models in public relations practice which PR practitioners must know include the RACE Model (R stands for Research, A for Action, C for Communication and E for Evaluation), the RICEE Model (R stands for Research, I for Information, C for Communication, E for Education and E for Evaluation) and the PR Transfer Process Model.

In view of the fore-going, it is considered imperative that organizations should employ well trained and competent public relations practitioners who would be able to carry out research when the need arises in order to actualize the goals and objectives for which the organization is brought to bear.

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