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Public Relations in Education: A Strategic Plan for universities in Nigeria

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Abstract

Education is about generating, disseminating, advancing, and applying knowledge. To succeed in it therefore, requires qualified

teachers, teachable students, enabling environment, healthy competition, and a culture of motivation. In the absence of these, university education fails. This paper addressed the question: are universities in Nigeria today still able to deliver on the lofty goals of education? Hinged on the theories of perception and persuasion, through a discursive approach, the paper observed that universities have largely lost its place of pride as reservoir of knowledge in Nigeria. The paper found a growing worry about university education arising from inadequate funding, poor quality of staff and students, brain-drain, incessant strikes, poor leadership, corruption among others. This paper thus, advocated the use of public relations strategies to revamp the ailing system through a series of public relations approaches in education, otherwise called Educational Public Relations (EPR). The paper further found that this happened because universities suffered neglect, hence failed to deliver quality and standard. Instead, they depreciated, produced declined value due to use of moribund facilities. The paper, however expressed hope that strategic use of a public relations plan was a necessary intervention. EPR plan was recommended as a catalyst to bring back the vigour, lost glory, positive public image, integrity and trust in the university system in Nigeria.

Keywords: Public relations, Education, Education Public Relations, Strategy, Strategic plan.

Introduction

'We have a total population enrolment of slightly over two million in the entire university system, which spells a very serious problem; it is almost a crisis.' Abubakar Rasheed (2020).

In recent years, education system in Nigeria, the universities in particular, have faced challenges in the areas of access, quality, safety on campus, inclusion, among others. In an Agency Report (2020)

tagged, Nigeria enrolment “near crisis” with only two million students, the Executive Secretary of the National Universities Commission (NUC), Professor Abubakar Rasheed admitted in a statement in 2020 that wholesome set and decay of the system in Nigeria are being overhauled at the moment in what has recently culminated in the Core Curriculum for Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS) policy currently being pushed to be implemented across universities in Nigeria.

Conversely, the United Nations (UN, 2023) avers impending youth bulge in Nigeria between now and 2050 which no doubt presents a great opportunity for economic development and demographic dividend. This equally raised palpable concerns for the education sector. Whichever way, 258 universities (148 private, 60 state, 50 federal) in Nigeria will contest for the attention of students and parents for enrolment, whether there is explosion or decline in population.

Apparently, there is educational crisis of a sort in Nigeria. According to news.ng (2023), Nigeria has emerged 8th in top countries for international students' enrolment in the USA for 2023; China: 262, 992; India: 253, 631 among others. Thus, it appears that access to quality education and safe education is on the rise in the country. All these are cropping up at a time there is a hue and cry about inadequate funding for universities, corruption in the system, inadequate instead of adequate infrastructural facilities, shortage rather than competent academic staff, and incessant strike actions in addition to brain-drain instead of brain-gain or brain-exchange, poor rather than cutting edge research, weak rather than astute administrators , and so on. In the words of the Nigeria's NUC Executive Secretary, this picture “spells a very serious problem”.

As a result, the quality and quantity of education in Nigeria are deemed disgracefully low and inept. It is feared that graduates from most universities in Nigeria (honestly including a few so called lecturers) are not capable of competing or matching their counterparts elsewhere in the world. One academic in a university in Nigeria describes the ongoing system as a big SCAM. The United Nations International, Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2023) says the

education system is abysmally low since 10.5 million children are reportedly out-of-school, which amounted to the highest, globally. They note that illiteracy rates are high and there are big gaps in achievement between the rich and the poor, boys and girls across different regions in the country.

Overall, 152 out of 187 countries in UN's Human Development Index, were below Kenya, Ghana, Botswana, and Rwanda. In the 2023 global ranking, University of Ibadan (UI), University of Lagos (UNILAG), and Covenant University made the top 1,000 list. As it were, UI and UNILAG were placed at 401 to 500 places, while Covenant University was placed between 601 and 800th place on the scale (www.premiumtimesng.com).

Point is, universities in Nigeria, whether government-owned or privately-owned have attracted negative public image for a long time. Private universities are perceived as business empires of the owners where key interest rest on the bottom-line; the government universities (both state and federal) are perceived as public properties, no-man's land, miracle centres, where anything goes. Of the truth, some public universities are loosely perceived as centres for mass production of not-so-good, half-baked graduates who often need restraining. Hence, the aim of this paper is to explore a strategic public relations plan to boost the public image of universities in Nigeria. To be specific, to appraise public relations communication strategies that will help to rekindle the battered image of universities and restore the glory lost due to benign neglect and obvious depreciating value of education in the country. The paper's essence is to explore PR activities aimed at improving a favourable public image of universities and promote the brand values.

Framework

This paper is hinged on two theories. First, is Recharad Gregory's devised constructive theory of perception. Max Wertheimer was reportedly the first to use the word “perception” while trying to explain the Gestalt principle. The concept of perception posits that people make guesses of what is seen not only based on the sensation received but also on expectations and past knowledge. By application, when students, parents and other prospects become

aware of, or exposed to a university, an institution, the stimulation received is organised, interpreted in the memory and recalled as perceived. So, if universities or their brands are deliberately and creativity packaged, framed, presented or delivered to targets audience to achieve a predetermined maximum appeal in all possible respects, such institutions or brands would be perceived in a positive light. This theory is relevant to this paper in the sense that universities or their brands packaged in such a way that their schema, best efforts, ideas, services, products and what have you are strategically presented in the best way possible to the audience, customers, prospects, such brands or institutions would be rated in a very prestigious light in public estimation; and highly, positively appreciated, perceived and patronised as well.

A second framework is Sherif and Holland's (1961) persuasion theory. Persuasion theory holds that information is provided to influence others behaviour, attitude, etc. Such information, as persuasive messages without duress, in a subtle way, stimulate changes in attitude and behaviour. This theory is very relevant and related to the public relations manager's responsibility of reducing the gap or difference between a university's existing image and how various publics perceive and patronise the institutions or the brands.

To tidy up this theoretical expositions, Tirone's (2023) argument and advice in juxtaposing education, theory, and research in public relations is readily at hand. Tirone argues that public relations professionals need to be educated in research and data collection and that a graduate degree will be necessary for admission to the profession in the future. Yet, he argues that much theory-based research is of little use to the practitioner and that reducing the behaviour of human beings to “lows” of behaviour cannot be accomplished in the social sciences. In its place he argues for applied public relations research that is “socially relevant “rather than “theoretically relevant”.

University Education in Nigeria

Historically, the idea of university started in Nigeria around 1948 with the establishment of the University College Ibadan (later named University of Ibadan, UI) following Eliot's Commission

recommendation. Subsequently, other first generation universities came on board, such as the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) 1960, Obafemi Awolowo University 1962 (the University of Ife, Ile-Ife). With this, Nigeria launched her scholarship path to university education. By 1999, three private faith-based universities emerged with approval to open the space for a liberalised education system in the country. Madonna, Babcock, and Igbinedion Universities became the first three to be granted licences. Today, there are 258 universities including state-owned in Nigeria, and still counting. The terrain has become highly saturated, competitive even as outbound students, prospective outbound students, and parents are moving out in droves abroad in search of excellent and top-notch options. They complain of failing standards in education in Nigeria. They bemoan lack of access to good quality of education in the universities in Nigeria where facilities have become moribund and lost the hallmark of quality and standard.

Conceptually, education is the act or process of acquiring knowledge or training, especially, systematically during childhood and adolescence. At the university level education occurs through sharing of formal and, or professional experiences in different areas of teaching that basically includes undergraduates and postgraduates. After thorough semesters of research, teaching and learning, a university may reward a degree or some sort of credentials to the successful learner. As Alemu (2018, p.221) sums this, “a university is a higher learning institution that brings men and women to a high level of intellectual development in the arts and sciences, and in the traditional professional disciplines, and promotes high-level research.” For more research exploits from scholars and professionals, see Walter (2023); Iyoha, Ugowan, Maamaa (2022); Chinelo (2022) and others.

Public relations to the rescue

Every university ought to manage how others see and feel about the institution and the institution's brand. That is the way to do public relations. It means to present the university or its brand to outsiders or others the best way possible. Scholars, academics, professionals, other researchers have over the years attempted to achieve agreeable,

uniform definition of public relations without a smooth success. Thus, the field of PR is still loosely defined in multiple ways that spin. Yet, experts agree PR is one of the fastest growing disciplines in the world. In Nigeria, in the NUC newly established Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, PR Department has been approved and it has started running in many private and public universities around the country. The man, Edward Louis Bernays, 1945, who wrote the first PR textbook as an American pioneer (and father) in the field of PR and propaganda must be pleased in blessed memory to hear this. Likewise, the first authoritative book writer and father of PR in Nigeria, Sam Epelle, the author of *Essentials of Public Relations*. It is believed in curriculum and in practice that PR is the discipline in charge and responsible for crafting, managing, and maintaining the institution's public image and reputation. No wonder, writing on Strategic public relations: Paid, owned and earned media, Maamaa (2023, p. 7) says:

With this, the coast of study and curriculum have been expanded. Henceforth, students in the new department of public relations will study public relations as the art and science of persuasive communication ... in other words, public relations play the critical role of framing public perception of a company or brand by engaging, imparting, and creating relationships with partners across multiple platforms.

Why PR in education?

Building and maintaining a corporate image for universities in Nigeria are getting increasingly imperative as many institutions are steeply degenerating in a number of ways in a tertiary education environment with enrolment competition on the rise anywhere you look. Competition for students and parents' attention for instance has become fierce among universities in the country.

Public Relations Education (also called Education Public Relations, EPR) is appraised here as a panacea able to revamp the

decaying public image of universities in Nigeria. EPR is a recipe to create and instil a positive public image and prestige of institutions in the eyes of target audience. EPR ensures that institutions function successfully in society. For universities, primarily, EPR attracts fresh students and improve brand recognition.

Besides continuously bringing to the attention of students the courses they offer, and their fee structure. Exploring this line of thought, Gehna (2021) affirms that public relations play an important role in the education sector. EPR can help to promote any brand related to learning. What then are the 360* strategic plan of PR in education?

360* strategic plan

Collins English Dictionary (2023) online refers to strategy as a general plan or set of plans intended to achieve something, especially over a long period (www.collinsdictionary.com). To be strategic is to apply a competitive position, to play up a unique selling point. As Michael Porter once said, it is to deliberately choose different set of activities to deliver a unique mix of value. Every university is expected to have a concrete plan, a blueprint for attaining or achieving set goals. What are these strategic activities?

Awareness creation

No university can survive in obscurity. A university that has what it takes, must increase her awareness status from the unknown to the known. Public relations practice requires universities to sell their distinctive qualities and knowledge, of faculties and departments' activities, events, such as lecture series, inaugural lectures, seminars, symposia, and conferences. Other university activities to explore for awareness creation are matriculation ceremonies, convocation ceremonies, student's weeks parents/teachers' meetings, thanksgivings, press conferences, and a lot more. As a strategic plan, public relations could assist the university's online review presence and assist to give direction to online ad, besides stepping in before, during and after calamity hits the institution.

Promotes brand's value

Public relations is competent to emphasize any university's trust value, and keep reputation intact. PR goes for audiences such as

students, parents, communities, institutions, government, and government agencies etc. And work for brand image by deploying concepts and theories that resonate with students and parents positively. PR is capable of improving universities' reputation through thought leadership pieces, influencer contacts, and networking methods and skills.

National and international connection

Offshore cooperation is very essential for every university in Nigeria. PR is able to build national and international connection with universities overseas. PR does this to give worldwide visibility and develop academic / research / alliances collaborations with foreign universities. The strategic plan is activated through international accreditation, department and faculty exchange programmes, students exchange programmes, international degrees and partnership, etc.

Target audience

PR help the university to make continuous, consistent and sustained strategic efforts aimed to create and build impressive contacts with university targets. In this light, public relations will assist industries, recruiters and high-profile agencies to build and keep mutual, beneficial, and creative relationship that is sustainable overtime.

Fact is, public relations craft pitches for publications that students, family decision-makers read, such as niche publications. As experts in their field , public relations personnel emphasize on stories that build brand credibility by commenting on trending university education stories, stressing global best practices, and benchmark minimum standards.

Media relations

There is need to involve the media for university visibility. The media are powerful to control how a university is viewed in the media and in society. Media are able, through releases, breaking news, information sheets, on-site media tours to encourage journalists to publish good messages that resonate with target audience and keep the university visible. Educational public relations strategies are basically concerned about managing how information about a

university is disseminated to the public, especially the mass media. EPR needs to leverage local, regional, or state media to tell the university's story. It is critical for universities to generate effective media contact list in addition to cultivating smooth relationships with influential journalists, media gurus, and other significant captains of the media industry.

Community relations

Any university that ignores her host community might be doing so at the institution's peril. PR, whether in-house or outside agency, will practically build and develop loyalty in the community where the university is located. This practice engages community stakeholders and raises a university's profile among the people around the institution's environment and neighbourhood to encourage word of mouth campaigns and community decision making in the interest of the university.

Campaign strategies

Public relations strategies for universities are numerous, continuous activities involving press releases, advertorials, newsletters, brochures, social media, and many more. *Releases* engage with the university audience, generate public appearances leveraging on the use of newspapers, word of mouth, television shows, and the Internet platforms.

Advertorials are ads that operate in the guise of news items or newspaper reviews. *Advertorials* link advertising with newspaper's reputation for the university. Advertising and marketing specialists assist to create television advertorials that are used as a form of advertising and public relations campaign idea for the university. Newsletters, printed, posted, or emailed, are excellent way to interact and keep students or prospective students up to date on new ideas, innovations, curricula, programmes, products and services. Newsletters help to regularly provide current information and updates to students and parents.

Brochures, or catalogue, well designed, assist to keep students, parents, and the general public in good knowledge, memory of university programmes and inspire public trust, confidence, and information on websites, online, and university paid, owned, and

earned media.

Social media make it possible for the university to skip the media and reach out directly to students, parents, and other university clients. Social media also have the capacity to boost online traffic and timely response to online comments, unfavourable or critical viewpoints; other visibility and university public image concerns.

Scope

As public relations gain wider acceptability among universities, expectations for the discipline are also expanding in scope in Nigeria. It is becoming mandatory for every university in Nigeria, or elsewhere in the world to appoint a public relations firm (outside service), or raise a public relations department (in-house) capable of doing EPR. This arrangement handles all aspects of EPR and harnesses the benefits for the university. Today's public relations therefore, are still being trusted to handle responsibilities covering more than the following scope:

1. raising university's best profile;
2. recruiting new students and new staff members for the university;
3. engaging the public over new policies and programmes in the university;
4. talking to parents about university curriculum;
5. promoting additional university services such as distance learning, outreaches, online open access education programmes;
6. promoting and encouraging university investment Interests;
7. organising fund-raising events in the university;
8. building cross-university studies, collaboration researches, inter-departmental, inter-faculty, inter-university alliances and exchange programmes;
9. university stakeholders' engagement relations networks;
10. building impact for Core Curriculum Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS) in the university;
11. managing university reputation and prestige in Nigeria;
12. managing issue, conflict and crisis in the university;
13. mounting and operating owned media platforms;

14. managing university events such as matriculation, orientation, convocation, lecture series, inaugural lecture, facility visit, press conference, symposium, seminar, Founder's Day, parent's day, anniversary celebration, and other programmes;
15. handling social media marketing strategy and web content communications planning;
16. campaign development and implementation.

Audience

EPR addresses very specialised and strategic audiences. Some of them include journalists and editors of news publications such as newspapers, magazines, university journals, books, newsletters, and other publications including radio channels, and televisions. Others are:

- International students from other climes and continents.
- National students from neighbouring countries and other nationalities.
- Local students from other regions inside and within the country.
- Community audience around localities of the university in question.
- Alumni involving graduates of the university
- Parents of undergraduates and former graduates of the university (or, e.g. a vocal mum or dad at the university gate or faculty office)
- Students currently studying in the university at any level.
- Prospective students who have applied, hoping, likely, expected, or anticipated to join a university.
- Faculty audiences involve every department and members of a faculty.
- Departments involve every member, staff and students of a department or departments.
- Governments audiences cut across local, state, federal governments and agencies or parastatals.

- General public is a reference to people as a whole involving community, governments, etc.

Global best practices

Globally, standard requirements, professional expectations, and agreeable rules, norms, behaviour of the practice have been well established and enshrined in the conduct of public relations in every sphere of the practice.

Research; is fundamental to global best practices in EPR. Deep research will expose and open up the EPR practitioners mind to broad intelligence, understanding of the university, the environment of operations, the people, the economy, politics, the social life, the languages, religions, cultural nuances, media landscape, and other preferences. A properly guided practitioner with deep (data) understanding of the terrain will dispense EPR with impacts and expertise.

Relationships; are core to survival with the media. Practitioners must dutifully build strong relationships with influential journalists and media outlets in and around the operational zone. Effective media relations well initiated, built and continuously sustained, will bring about public understanding of the university with news. Globally, effective media relationship hinges on truth, operates on openness, and drives with absolute respect for the media. This will earn any university a beautiful media portrayal in the public.

Timely information to the media; is a scoop. Every outlet wants to be first to break the news. Timely information about events on campus keeps a media outlet above the rest. Besides, a teaser of the university's Inventions, invocations, new programmes, services, ideas, or supplemental education policy. EPR team could send out pitches that offer helpful tips. Many media outlets like tips or pitches that could be posted almost instantly without amendment, adjustment or corrections if it is honed as a ready-to-go teaser piece.

Relevant information; is germane to journalism or media practice. They, the media, like it when a university's EPR crew shows deep thinking in theory and practice. EPR should not only think outside the box, but should think from outside the box. Capitalising

on timely news, pitching with a sense of urgency, with a reference on upcoming events. EPR should keep an eye on both academic, professional, and cultural calendars which could help the university to maximize opportunities in the news. For instance, apt pitching could assist to bring the university's brand into a relevant news cycle. A good example is the upcoming Madonna University anniversary celebration. Importantly, local news outlets are usually at hand and most likely to pick pitches from the university campuses in their environment. Local, community newspapers, radios, television can generate more conversations and talking points about a university's brands than faraway national or international media outlets. For instance, having Wazobia FM Elele, Port Harcourt, Choice FM, Authority FM Nnewi, Madonna Radio Okija, Blaze FM Orafite, et cetera to make some noise about recent NUC's full accreditation of programmes, and approval of new disciplines, faculties and departments in Madonna University Nigeria could generate useful local conversations in the university environment. As they say, charity begins at home.

Transparent communication; is acceptable global best practice in EPR. A university's door should be kept open for the media to view. This means that there should be no doubt about access to details about activities of the institution.

Skills

Certain natural human feature or endowment are useful characteristics for PR practice.

Soft skills, an embodiment of people-centred nature, ability to relate friendly with others, shrewdness to lead others with warmth, tact to manage people of diverse orientation kindly, candour to relate or navigate easily with even difficult people, savvy with handling team communication. And, willingness to solve the many problems of people. People who are cut out in this nature naturally fit in to the PR job where only personnel with tough shock absorbers survive the climate.

Written and oral communication skills are almost mandatory skills needed to function and operate as PR personnel. There will be lots of crafting and drafting of press releases, addresses, speeches,

copy writings of all sorts. There will also be the needs to make public talks, anchor presentations, moderate discussions, direct conference sessions, MC occasions, chair meetings, etc. One way or another, use of the gift of the gap is essential in the PR practice.

Creativity, criticality and deep thinkings, are also required PR skills. Genuine PR personnel are always ready and capable of making things happen. They are expected to come up with highly imaginative fresh ideas and notions. They are usually inventive and original in thoughts. Their ingenuity leads to a proactive approach to EPR issues.

And, if matters get critical, they equally get even more critical, tough, and set out to take the bull by the horn. They leave no stone unturned in the search for solutions to problems, even at the cost of a fire-brigade approach.

As deep thinkers, they get thorough, detailed, and in-depth in appraisal of EPR trends. If issues rise to a head, such as when a university erupts in crisis, the EPR men or women wear deep thinking caps with a public relations state of mind to bring up lasting solutions.

Digital media skills, are core to doing EPR in universities. The internet has made digitisation possible. There is no going back on digital involvement in every aspect of public relations practice. Today, we live in a digitally wired world. As EPR does video and audio productions for universities, they are used to tell institutional, corporate stories. Parts of the skills include web/data analytics to handle, content to create and manage, e-commerce and digital marketing to do, network and info security to monitor. All these and more will help to build online presence, engage with university's strategic audiences to make EPR process measurable and impactful.

Careers

EPR is a blossoming modern-day career anywhere in the world. With 258 universities in Nigeria right now, and NUC thriving with the expansion of public relations curriculum landscape, a future for EPR is firmly assured. The industry is large, and the labourers are few and craved. They function as managers of EPR and account executives. They could be copy writers, media researchers, and public affairs consultants. Others are fundraisers, public information officers, speech writers, lobbyists, publicity agents, etc.

UI example

Elements of EPR practices could be found in the special or “chest-beating” way in which some universities in Nigeria referred proudly to themselves. Exactly what we hear when the University of Benin says “UNIBEST”. This suggests that the university is claiming to be the best among others in the country. We have also heard “UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA AND OTHERS”. This claim suggests that only two universities are in the country, University of Nigeria on one side, and all others (put together as one) on the other side. Then comes “UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN: FIRST AND THE BEST”. This is a claim of being the premier in the country and the best as well. The three informal slogans of the universities cited are doing one thing, putting themselves forward the best way they possibly can. Whatever way you see these universities after reading these informal slogans is entirely your perception. For reasons not based on or related to the informal slogans mentioned or any form of rating whatsoever, but at the risk of making a rather lengthy quotation, the duties of public relations unit of the University of Ibadan (ui.edu.ng) is found instructive and quoted as follows.

1. Initiating and implementing public relations strategies for the university to enable it maintain cordial relations with its teaming publics.
2. Writing, editing and publishing information products of enlightenment and reference that provide relevant information to all stakeholders e.g. Official Bulletin, Newsletters, Special Release, The Premier Tower, Brochures, etc.
3. Monitoring public opinion to identify trends and measure public acceptability of the institution's activities as well as identifying public concerns and expectations.
4. Keeping accurate and up- to-date data bank on all milestone events, newspaper cuttings on higher education related news, newspaper reviews, broadcast materials, press releases, speeches and other communication materials.
5. Writing copies of corporate developments based on requests from relevant faculties/ Departments/Units and event specific

- issues including congratulatory messages, obituaries etc.
6. Coordinating all arrangements for corporate and official functions such as Graduation / Matriculation ceremonies etc., Inaugural lectures, University lectures, Distinguished guest lectures, Exchange lectures series, Staff parties, Tours and receptions for dignitaries as well as welcome/ send-off parties. The Public Relations Officer serves as or arranges for comperes at such functions.
 7. Liaising with important dignitaries on visits to the University or arranging outsiders by the University functionaries.
 8. Press Relations – organising press conferences, interviews, radio/TV talks etc.
 9. Updating the Bulletin, News and Newspaper pages on the University Website.
 10. Any other duties as may be assigned from time to time by the Vice Chacellor, Registrar, other Principal Officers and the Deputy Registrar (Vice Chancellor's Office).

Conclusion

Pedro A. Noguera, a University of Southern California sociology scholar, did not become The Most Influential Education Researcher in 2023, without a plan. He kept his eyeball rolling on his Google scholar scores, kept the printer's shop busy with his published books, kept a tap on his newspaper and web mentions, and ensured the scope and reach of his work were impactful to the goal. Professor Noguera clearly had a strategic plan to become number one on the most influential education researchers list, 2023. A strategic plan is a deliberate conveyor belt to success in any venture. This point has been made as Maamaa (2023) says:

“Many persons, families, corporate organisations, nations and the likes have fallen because the use of communication was not strategic”.

Crisis in the education sector in Nigeria may be multifarious but must be firmly but professionally addressed if only to prove as Walter (2023) notes, that “education is not a scam after all”. Why? Because

education could still be trusted to generate, disseminate, advance, and apply knowledge through qualified teachers to qualified students in an enabling environment for learning with a strong capacity to engage and compete at International level of scholarship.

With EPR, the growing worry will end and the reservoir of knowledge will return to deliver brand new, quality education. The issues of funds, declined quality, labour disputes and closure of universities, brain-drain, leadership shortcomings, demand and supply imbalances and others are within the purview of EPR to the rescue.

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