

THE NEED FOR EFFECTIVE MEDIA RELATIONS MANAGEMENT IN COMPANIES

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ABSTRACT

The changes that occurred as a result of the industrial revolution has caused business organizations to amend their former (*laissez faire*) way of doing business to a more active one. This is unconnected with how other business organizations constantly strive to outdo and dominate others in the marketplace. Those who know the power of the media have placed communication at the centre of their business activities by establishing and sustaining good relationships with media practitioners. Thus, the emergence of media relations. This paper aims to ascertain the need for effective media relations management in companies and the benefits attached. Relevant literatures related to the subject matter have been reviewed, presenting the need for organizations to establish a mutual relation with media outlets. The media dependency theory lends support to this research. It should be noted that without realistic, periodic practice, even the best crisis media relations plan will fall short.

KEYWORDS: Companies, Management, Media Relations.

INTRODUCTION

The changes that have occurred in the world since the beginning of the industrial revolution have forced many business industries to evolve from the simple *laissez faire* way of doing business to a more active and participatory one. It has become even more difficult and complicated to do business because of the enormous competitions facing many business outfits. This trend does not relate to a particular location as its impact has assumed a global dimension. Some companies have forcefully shifted their priorities from only maximizing profits, to simple daily survival. This survival is tied more to business communication than to mere marketing strategies. Effective

communication has become the most crucial component in negotiations aimed at ensuring the survival as well as achievement of organization's goals and objectives. It helps to foster a good working relationship between the management and staff, which can improve their morale and efficiency.

The old way of doing business has completely improved. Communication has been placed at the centre of all business activities. Daubert (1974) has submitted that there are multitude of cause for the changes and their multiplying effects. There are also many different ways of looking at the causes. But higher expectations has led to a more selective public.

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It is as a result of these changes that companies now strive towards establishing good relationships with members of the fourth estate of the realm-the media. Thus, the emergence of media relations as a major concern for most organizations.

The concept and practice of media relations, especially as it applies to corporate image-making for companies, has often suffered a lot of differing approaches owing to divergent of views regarding its scope, limit, essence, functions and purposes.

According to Aronoff (1976), some companies see media relations as mere press agency or publicity. While others see it as a very vital aspect of public relations campaign. Some others see it as a fire brigade approach basically applied during crises. Still, other business organizations do not see the need to establish and sustain an effective media relations at all. But all of these reasons are the situations for which media relations came to be established.

Consequently, the roles that media relations play in the overall growth of most companies in today's business environment have become very crucial and necessary. Businesses put like seventy per cent (70%) of their efforts and resources trying to outdo others within the same business environment, thereby attracting more patronage to their goods and services. Studies have revealed that most businesses fail to understand the differences between media relations and direct advertising or even marketing. Media relations stresses the need for third party (media) endorsements of the product, service, firm or a particular individual and then using the third party to disseminate vital information to their target audiences. Despite its relevance in the entire business setting, media relations has not been given its peculiar position in most organizations. Most companies have failed to position their company's image in good light as a result of their poor relationship with the media

which form an integral component of the survival of their goods and services in the ever-competitive business environment. This paper therefore, attempts to unveil the relevance of managing effective media relations and the benefits accrued to business organizations who establish and sustain favourable relationship with media practitioners within and outside their immediate business environment.

THE CONCEPT OF MEDIA RELATIONS EXPLAINED

Media relations, an aspect of public relations has developed into an interesting field of study to public relations experts. Most public relations activities are carried out with the help of the media. Thus, one can convincingly say that the success of every public relations activities bothers on media relations as the media is the ultimate guarantor of the people's right to know. Media relations is one of the most critical areas within any corporate communication function (Wilcox, Cameron, Ault and Agee, 2003; Argenti, 2003). "The media is both a constituency and a conduit through which investors, suppliers, retailers and consumers receive information about and develop images of a company" (Argenti, 2003, p. 101). So, what exactly is media relations?

Turk (1985) has defined media relations as the practice performed by public relations practitioners, of providing information subsidies to the media to systematically distribute information on behalf of their clients. Information subsidy, according to Zoch and Molleda (2006) as cited in Supa (2008) refers to the term used to describe the generation by practitioners prepackaged information to promote their organizations' viewpoints on issues, with little or no cost (in terms of time and money) or effort to the person receiving the information. In other words, the media relations practitioner acts as a sort of "pre-reporter" for the journalists, providing them with information that they need to do their jobs (Supa, 2008).

Harrison (2005) views media relations to mean the term for activities that involve liaising directly with people responsible for producing news and feature stories in the mass media. The primary goal of media relations is to maximize positive coverage of organization's activities in the mass media without paying for such services directly through advertising, which is most times not within the reach and affordability of small-scale businesses. The challenges of liaising with the media are in knowing what the media want, and in helping to present images, ideas and information accurately and fairly. O'Brien (2014) further adds that media relations can be described as a company's interaction with the editors, reporters and journalists. The media can be newspapers, magazines, radio, television and the internet. The goal is to communicate client's newsworthy message, story or information using the appropriate media outlets. A company may need only one person to work with the media or choose to hire a team of experts depending on the amount of information that has to be controlled. This can be accomplished internally or an external agent can be hired to get the job done. Everything has to be carried out in a way that places your company in a positive light.

Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, Toth and Van Leuven (2004) has summed up the meaning of media relations as being *all about relationship*.

It all comes down to relationships. I trust reporters I know and I don't trust the reporters I don't know. Most of us have longstanding relationships with journalists that are based on mutual trust. My advice to PR professionals is to know the journalists that cover their industry well and develop mutual credibility (p. 183).

As Duke (2001) submitted, whether we examine media relations in a historical context, or look at the modern-day practices, one thing is certain: effective media relations involve good working relationships. Media relationships are simply one

aspect of the relationships necessary for the success of any company.

MEDIA RELATIONS IN COMPANIES: AN IMPORTANT JUNCTURE

Day by day, business organizations are waking to the realization that ultimately, they operate by public consent. As Mindszenty (1989) as quoted in Trahan, (1993) puts it, people have an intrinsic curiosity about things. We are in a society that feed on a huge doses of information, both useful and irrelevant, via the media. And since part of the intent of most stories is to find out who is to blame and what went or could go wrong, companies have to develop a high level of doubt and concern about organizational credibility. If the answers to certain questions and concerns are not forthcoming, with and through the efforts of the media, the public will reconsider its stands and consents, either to withdraw consent or to boycott. In any case, it is the company that loses more.

Baran (2004) has also submitted that as the number of media outlets grow, coupled with the recent technological advancements, there is the sharp increase in the complexity of dealing with them. Companies now require help in understanding and dealing with the various media, in preparing and organizing materials for them, and in placing those materials following the right designs and outlets. Therefore, no matter what one does in PR, there must be a touch with the relevant publics. One sure way of doing this successfully is through press/media relations. Thus, media relations has become the chief source through which public relations practitioners achieve their aim of reaching their organization's publics-both internal and external.

Howard (2004) has offered a succinct list of tips that media relations professionals must keep in mind. Aside from addressing the importance of the relationship, she also stated that 'the emphasis in a media relations should be on the

relations aspect-working to build longstanding relations with the people who cover your organization' (p.36). Howard and Matthews further stressed that effective media relations entails knowing the deadlines for all media that normally cover your organization, timing announcements in order to accommodate various media and remembering that there may be special requirements for your organization (in case of publicly-held companies) or perhaps special requirements for your media outlets.

So, as a media relations expert, there is need for mastering the basic skills of writing and editing, learning to become a "reporter's reporter" without being afraid to ask questions of the reporter, and trying to get a good grasp of what reporters need in order to do their job well. Great care and emphasis must therefore be attached to the relationship that exist between companies and the media. The basic objectives are to cultivate profitable liaison with them, build goodwill and maintain cordial and sustained relationships. Dealing with journalists can be fun but it is never a joke.

THE NEED FOR EFFECTIVE MEDIA RELATIONS MANAGEMENT IN COMPANIES

Companies have come to recognize the power of the media in communicating their business objectives and reputation to all its stakeholders. To protect and strengthen one's position and credibility in the industry, it is necessary for members of management to be equipped with the knowledge and skills required to effectively deal and communicate with the media.

In their book *On Deadline: Managing Media Relations*, Howard and Matthews (2000) have done a comprehensive work in the area of managing effective media relations in companies. The book offers media relations practitioners and the intending ones a comprehensive guide in dealing with journalists. Howard (2004) on her

part has added that the emphasis in every media relations programme should be on the relations aspect, which is, working to build long-term relations with the people who cover your organizations. The above assertion implies that everything about media relations revolves around a more sustainable, cordial, symbiotic and mutual relationship. This relationship goes 'beyond the newsworthiness of the practitioner's information and the actual practitioner-reporter relationship' (Supa, 2008, p. 10).

Howard and Matthews (2000) as summarized by Howard (2004) stipulated the following tips for effective management of media relations in companies.

- Knowing deadlines for all media that normally cover your organization, timing announcements in order to accommodate various media and remembering that there may be special requirements for your organization or perhaps special requirements for your media outlet.
- The importance of mastering the basic skills of writing and editing
- Taking advantage of the new media technology such as e-mail, websites, Facebook, Twitter, and so on, remembering that accessibility is paramount.
- Remembering your organization's employees that they are your best ambassadors, and your commitment to effective media relations should not supersede your obligation to the employees of your organization are most of the vital tips that practitioners should equip themselves with.

Vendrell (2001) has added that:

Another strategy for ensuring effective media relations during a critical incident is to develop media kits ahead of time. The media kits should be maintained in the emergency operations centre and immediately distributed to designated personnel when a crisis situation occurs.

However, it should be noted that without realistic, periodic practice (at least once a year), even the best crisis media relations plan will fall short.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Determining an appropriate theory for media relations research is an area that still needs more thorough work. Consequently, more often, most media relations researchers rely on a few established communication theories that are or can be commonly adopted to the media relations context. Theories like gatekeeping, agenda-setting and media framing are a few of such theories that lend support to this context. But the *Dependency Media theory* is deemed most suitable.

The above decision supports the opinion of Supa (2014) that it is not surprising that researchers would adopt more established theories in order to investigate media relations because of the complexity in establishing relationship theory without first defining what the relationship is. "Because media relations may mean different things to different people and because the nature of the media relations relationship differs depending on the journalist, the practitioner, and the organization's media relations goals, even beginning to establish a theory of media relations is difficult. However, it is not impossible, and several researchers have sought to establish theoretical constructs for the practice of media relations (Supa, 2014, p.7).

The media dependency theory concerns the conditions that give rise to media power and the conditions that constrain it. The potentially powerful role of mass media in modern society is deduced from its control over information resources that individuals and the groups must access to attain their goals. Developed by Ball-Rokeach and Defleur in 1976, dependency media theory posits that the more dependent an individual or an organization is on the media for having their needs met or fulfilled, the more important the media in modern society is, based

on an asymmetrical relationship between individuals and the media system (Ball-Rokeach, 1998, p.17). The media system exerts control over the resources that directly affect the goals of individuals and interpersonal network as regards understanding and orientation.

The submission by Inyang and Etta (2017) highlights that advertisers and media professionals have long realized that members of the society (the media audience) rely on the media to meet their needs, and so, they strive to package advertising messages in a manner that would be beneficial to the advertiser, the media and the members of the society in general. Hence, there is need for business organizations to establish and maintain a cordial relationship with mass media practitioners to ensure that news reports about their products and services are presented in a favorable light, thereby helping them win confidence in the minds of the public.

CONCLUSION

We are living in an era of increased accountability, where more business managers are beginning to understand the need for an interrelationship between effective media relations, good corporate reputation and sales performance. While some managers have come to recognize that good media relations activity can get their target audience to accurately perceive their organization's policy or performance, others are yet to do so. That is why those who have had the awareness early enough continue to maintain that dominance and stay ahead of their competitors in the ever-competitive business environment.

Obtaining news media coverage is not easy. There exist a lot of competition for the media limited space and airtime. The earlier an organization comes to this realization, the better. Therefore, an organization's media relations role is to make the task of covering your issues and your organization as easy and attractive for the media as possible. It is a percentage game: you

do the things to maximize the possibility of creating news interest in your issue or organization (Harrison, 2005). So the challenges of liaising with the media are in knowing what they want, and in helping them to present images, ideas and information accurately and fairly. Media activity should form part of a larger business plan, with every communication directed at a specific audience. This, of course, requires a clear understanding of your organization's mission, including its sales and marketing objectives. Conversely, when dealing with journalists, you must do your homework to understand what they write about, and to decide if the information they hold will truly be beneficial to both the organization and the journalists. In this case, media relations professionals will be viewed as valuable partners, rather than adversaries in the dissemination of information.

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