

The Use of Facebook in Organizational Public Relations Practice: A Study of Selected Organizations in Ghana

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ABSTRACT: *Social networking Sites are generally considered novel channels of communication which can be used to promote products or services, and increase brand awareness (29). This study examines the use of the most popular social networking site, Facebook, as a communication tool by public relations practitioners in Ghana. The study used a qualitative interview to get responses from public relations practitioners who were corporate members of the Institute of Public Relations, Ghana, and (IPR) that had official Facebook pages. It focused on what motivated the public relations practitioners under study to acquire official Facebook pages for their organizations, the level of interactivity of their Facebook pages, and their assessment of Facebook as a communication tool. The results showed that all the public relations practitioners interviewed for the study claimed that they acquired Facebook pages for their organizations because they (the public relations practitioners) consider it as a very effective tool to communicate with their target audience. The study also revealed that the Facebook pages of most of the organizations studied were very interactive and feedbacks were used to enhance relationship between the organizations and their publics. Finally, in spite of its problems, all respondents endorsed Facebook as an effective communication tool and highly recommended it for Public relations practitioners who were not using it.*

Key Words: *Public relations, publics, social networking sites, Facebook, new media.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

New communication media has changed the rules of the game in every part of strategic communication and in the business of managing relationships [2]. As a result of this, more than two-thirds of the current Fortune 2000 companies are using social networking sites [23]. Among all the social media used for communication by practitioners, [36] claimed that the one that is most widely used is Facebook.

Facebook is a [social networking service](#) which was founded by [Mark Zuckerberg](#) and his friends and launched in February 2004 by [Facebook, Inc.](#) According to Mark Zuckerberg, the initial idea for the website was motivated by a social need at Harvard to be able to identify people in other residential houses [7]. However, organizations, groups, individuals and businesses now have Facebook pages on which information is frequently posted.

There were 1.32 billion active users of Facebook worldwide as of June 30, 2014 [9]. According to Adzaho [1], the use of Facebook in Ghana has steadily been rising as the years go by. As of December 2013, there were 1,630,420 Facebook users in Ghana making the country the 9th highest in Africa rankings of Facebook users [16].

Information from public relations practitioners has been disseminated through the traditional media. The introduction of the new media onto the

communication landscape has changed the way communication works. Instead of the traditional method of pure output, where the company or organization controlled messages being disseminated to stakeholders, social media platforms such as Facebook have forced corporate communications to shift to a dialogue in which stakeholders also have power over the messages [26]. Since public relations practitioners play a vital role in carving and maintaining an image for an organization, it is imperative that as part of strategies to enhance their work, public relations practitioners would be more assertive, using Facebook as a tool for building lasting relationships with their publics.

Even though some traditional media professionals such as [33] label the new media as fads with no lasting value, Gregory [10: 245] stated that “the advent of the internet and electronic communication has transformed public relations, just as it has transformed many areas of organizational and business life”. [8] Also claimed that Companies and organizations with recognizable names such as Ernst and Young, and the World Bank have followed President Obama’s lead using social networking websites to reach their target audiences.

In Ghana, some organizations have acquired Facebook pages which are mainly used for marketing but it is not known if public relations practitioners also use Facebook to communicate with their audience. Although a number of research studies have examined the huge impact new communications media are having on the practice of public relations in western countries, there are no studies on how public relations practitioners in Ghana are using Facebook to communicate with their target audience. This is one of the motivations for this study – to find out how public relations practitioners use Facebook to enhance relationship with their publics.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Since its inception in 2004, Facebook has registered a growing number of users with an increase in the time they spend on the site [7]. According to [17], Facebook has become the top ranked Social Networking Site. [9] puts the active users of the site October 2014 Vol – II Issue - 2

as of June, 2014 at as high as 1.32 billion. Due to its increasing popularity, scholars such as [5] have underscored the need of using Facebook in public relations practice.

A major role of public relations practitioners is to communicate to their prospective targets to establish and maintain relationships. One, however, wonders if public relations practitioners in Ghana have been making good use of this new online communication system to communicate with their target audience. Even though a lot of studies have been conducted on the use of Facebook in Ghana, [25] claimed that most of the existing academic research had focused on identity presentation and private concerns. This study, therefore, attempted to find out if public relations practitioners in Ghana maximized the benefits of Facebook by using it as a channel to communicate with their target audience.

III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study sought to find out:

- Why public relations practitioners acquire official Facebook pages for their organisations
- If Facebook pages of Ghanaian organisations are interactive enough
- The views of public relations practitioners on the use of Facebook in organisational public relations practice

IV. THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

A. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is situated within the theoretical framework of the Four Models of Public Relations which was first propounded by [12].

Four models of public relations to explain public relations practices of organizations. The models are defined on two dimensions: the nature (one-way vs. two-way) and purpose (asymmetrical/unbalanced vs. symmetrical/balanced) of communication. The first model, press agency/publicity is propaganda where

telling the truth is not important [12]; is the least effective and least ethical model. These scholars noted that press agents worked to influence public opinion by creating news. The press agent invests no time in research and even less in the discussion of ethics. The aim is behavior manipulation and persuasion to influence audience to behave as the organization desires. Press agency is, therefore, a one-way communication.

The second model, public information, “is built on the assumption that an organization should communicate truthful information to its public(s) in a one-way process, but not necessarily with persuasive intent.” [24:194] Press releases, brochures and static Web content are tools used by these information dispensers.

The third model, two-way asymmetrical is defined as ‘scientific persuasion’ where the communication is two-way but unbalanced. The intention of the organization is to persuade its publics to support it and behave as it wants them to behave. According to [14:8] “the two-way asymmetrical model is a more sophisticated approach in which research is used to influence important publics toward a particular point of view.”

The last model, two-way symmetrical, is used to establish mutual understanding between the organization and the publics. The organization seeks to create a balanced effect by using dialogue ([12]. Again, these scholars maintained that under the two – way symmetrical model, the public relations practitioner uses communication to negotiate with publics, resolve conflict, and promote mutual understanding and respect between the organization and its publics. It will be interesting to find out if public relations practitioners in the Ghanaian organizations under study use Facebook as a relationship building tool.

The first two models are one-way, used to give information about the organization to the public; the next two models are two-way and rely on research; hence, they are seen as more sophisticated models. [13] Argue that the last model is the ideal one for the organizations to be both effective and ethical.

However, research findings indicate some organizations practice several of the models together. Given that organizations often combine the two-way asymmetrical model with the two-way symmetrical, and press agency with public information, the researcher generally situated the study within these models so as to find out the one Ghanaian organization he studied use most.

Scholars such as [6] criticized the models for being over-simplified. [6:148] suggests that in reality, “Unofficial organizational hierarchies and internal power struggles are likely to interfere with the function of Grunig’s formalized communications process”.

In spite of these criticisms, [4: 38] claim that “... the four models are remarkably robust and sound concepts”.

B. RELATED WORK

A number of research studies have been conducted to examine the transition of public relations from traditional practices to contemporary ones in the social media age. The majority of these studies aimed to answer a common set of questions regarding the use of social media for corporate communications [22].

Even though public relations practitioners believed in the use of new media in promoting an organization’s image, they had attached little or no importance to the potential ability of websites to be used as tools for enhancing two- way communication with their publics [28]. Similarly, [3] also claimed that public relations practitioners did not recognize social media as the most important source of information for their publics in either crisis or routine situations. Contrary to [3’s] assertion, [33] found that nearly half of the respondents in his study said they have incorporated social media such as Twitter and Facebook into their crisis plans. The assertions of [33] indicates that the public relations practitioners studied came to the understanding that social media has become an important factor in how crises were reported on by the media.

The websites of some Universities in USA and found that the universities he studied were not fully utilizing the relationship building capabilities of their websites [17]. Similarly, [32] claimed that though non-profit organizations he studied were open and transparent with their Facebook profiles, they were not using the sites to their full potential to inform others and get them involved with organizational activities. The assertions of the above scholars form the basis of the present study – to find out if public relations practitioners in Ghana are fully utilizing the relationship building capabilities of Facebook.

[36] Did an analysis on the increasing impact of social and other new media on public relations practice and claimed that 85% of his respondents said they believed that social media and traditional media complement each other. Consistent with [36's] claim, [11] also found that social media and traditional media worked together more than against each other and that social media were effective tools for disseminating and communicating news from traditional media sources. [11], however, noted that social media were viewed as less accurate, credible, trusted and truthful than traditional media by more than half of the respondents.

V. METHODOLOGY

A. RESEARCH DESIGN

The study adopted qualitative approach to collect data. Qualitative design begins with the assumption that the views and perspectives of others are useful and able to be made explicit [27].

In order to get information on how Ghanaian public relations practitioners use Facebook in their organizations, an in-depth interview was used. The choice of qualitative interview for this research was informed by the assertion of [8] that unlike other qualitative methods, in-depth interviews provide a unique research opportunity to get to the root of the issue being investigated. This claim coupled with that of [27] that interviews allow respondents to openly discuss their opinions, choices and motivation, made in-depth interview the most appropriate method for this study.

B. POPULATION AND SAMPLING

The target population for the study comprised all sixteen (16) corporate members of the Institute of Public Relations (IPR), Ghana as of October 2012. [34:94] posited that “Purposive samples are used frequently in mass media studies when researchers select respondents who use a specific medium and are asked specific questions about that medium”. Base on this assertion, purposive sampling strategy was used to select six (Airtel Bharti, Electricity Company of Ghana, RLg Communications, Toyota Company Ghana Limited, Vodafone Ghana, Volta River Authority) out of the sixteen organisations that had official Facebook pages. [34] again claimed that small sample sizes characterise qualitative interviews because results are not generalized to the whole population under study. The assertion of these scholars justifies the use of the small sample size for this study.

VI. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the in-depth interviews were grouped under the three main objectives of the study and discussed below:

A. REASONS FOR ACQUIRING OFFICIAL FACEBOOK PAGES

The study found that many of the organizations acquired official Facebook pages because they saw it (Facebook) as a good medium to communicate with their customers many of whom were using Facebook. At the time of this research, there were 1,630,420 Facebook users in Ghana, which makes her the 9th in the ranking in Africa. This motivated many organisations to acquire Facebook pages so they could meet with their target audience.

The number of years that these organizations have been on Facebook ranged from 3 to 7 years and each of them had between 900 to 2,500 friends and followers. [9], claims, that an average Facebook user has 130 friends. Based on this assertion, it can be concluded that the Ghanaian organizations studied have a huge following on Facebook. As a result, the public relations practitioners interviewed for this

study indicated that they used their organisations' Facebook pages as a communication tool and a medium to increase their customers' awareness on new and existing products as well as their achievements. The Corporate Communications Manager of Rlg Communications noted that:

“We posted information about our achievements, like some awards that we won on our Facebook page and we received congratulatory messages from our customers.”

This finding, seems to affirm [35] claim that social media is the way to go in contemporary public relations practice.

B. FACEBOOK AS INTERACTIVE MEDIA

With regards to how interactive the Facebook pages of organizations were, the study found that the organisations' Facebook pages made it very easy for them to interact with their target audiences.

The in-depth interviewed revealed that, these organizations usually get an average of 200 posts from their Facebook friends and followers about their product and services every day. In order to enhance the interactivity of their Facebook pages, the public relations practitioners of the organizations claimed individuals within the public relations units were tasked to manage their Facebook pages. They also indicated that the feedbacks they get from their customers are incorporated into their present and future plans.

As one of the respondents pointed out:

“Comments on our Facebook page help in decision making. It tells us what the concerns of customers are and some of these concerns are fed into the FAQs on our page.”

The highly interactive nature of Facebook pages of organizations was attributed to its informal nature which allows people with diverse educational backgrounds to post comments, even in “pidgin” English.

The findings of this study contradicts that of [28] that public relations practitioners attached little or no importance to the potential ability of websites to be used as tools for enhancing a two-way

communication with their publics. The present study found that most of the organizations studied posted truthful information about their products and services on their Facebook pages and also used the pages to resolve conflicts with their publics. [13] claimed that under the two-way symmetrical model, public relations practitioners used communication to negotiate with publics, resolve conflicts and promote mutual understanding and respect between an organization and its publics. The findings of the study did not only confirm [13] assertion but also corroborates [24] claim that the public information model is built on the assumption that an organization should communicate truthful information to its publics. So, it can be concluded that the organizations studied for this research used both the public information and to some extent the two-way symmetric models.

C. THE VIEWS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS ON FACEBOOK

When asked on their views on the use of Facebook in organisational public relations practice, most of the public relations practitioners urged companies to take full advantage of the social media tools. According to them, the highly interactive nature of Facebook, its cost effectiveness and speed of information dissemination makes it indispensable in modern public relations practice. The recommendation made was consistent with the proposal put forward by [19] that the integration of internet tools into contemporary public relations practice is necessary.

In spite of the heavy endorsement of Facebook by the respondents, some of them raised concerns on falsehood and mischief usually caused by either unscrupulous competitors or customers with fake identities. They, however, maintained that this concern is the more reason why organizations must acquire their Facebook pages so as to quickly respond to these rumors and falsehoods before they get out of hand.

VII. CONCLUSION

Results for the study indicated that organizations studied acquired Facebook pages because social media in general and Facebook in particular were seen as the second largest world for their present and future audiences. Facebook was found to be the best place for the placement of information about products and services and the best avenue for getting feedback from an organization's audience.

Facebook was also seen as a very interactive platform where instant feedbacks were got from the organisations' publics. These feedbacks, according to the respondents were incorporated into the organisations' present and future plans. Finally, most of the public relations practitioners endorsed facebook as an effective communication tool.

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