

Public Relations Practice in Ghanaian Tertiary Institutions: A Study of Islamic University College and Valley View University

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ABSTRACT: *Since 1948, the National Association of Secondary Principals (NASSP) has been promoting educational public relations all over the world. This study used the excellent theory as a point of reference to examine the public relations practice in two private universities (Islamic University College and Valley View University) in Ghana. The study adopted a qualitative in-depth interview to find out from the communication practitioners from these institutions how they managed communication at their respective universities, the kinds of communicator roles they performed and the models of public relations they applied in their works. The results showed that the public relations practitioners largely failed to strategically managed communications in their institutions. Media relations emerged as the dominant role these communicators performed. The over emphasis on media relations made the public relations managers of the two institutions mostly applied one-way public information model in their communication process to the detriment of the more acceptable two-way symmetrical model.*

KEYWORDS: *Educational Public Relations, Tertiary Institutions, Public Relations Models*

I. INTRODUCTION

Public Relations (PR) scholars such as [4] see public relations as a systematic effort to establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationship between an organization and its publics. Over the years, public relations have been playing very important communication roles in society. Businesses all over the world have been using such public relations tools as publicity, sponsorship, event management as well as image and identity buildings to promote their products and services.

Having realized that public relations is a necessary tool in making their needs and programs known, higher educational institutions also began to use it to gain public support. [13: 2] posits that educational Public Relations is “a planned, systematic management function, designed to help improve the programs and services of an educational organization. It relies on a comprehensive, two-way communication process involving both internal and external publics with the

goal of stimulating better understanding of the role, objectives, accomplishments, and needs of the organization.” According to the association, this kind of public relations aims at assisting in interpreting public attitudes, identifying and helping shape policies and procedures in the public interest, and carrying on involvement and information activities which earn public support and understanding [13] [2] noted that, school public relations used to be a one-way communication street which aimed at getting positive image about the school out. These scholars suggested a reverse situation where education public relations establishes and promote partnerships within the school community. According to them an effective public relations must create value by giving the public the information they need. It must also ask for information just as much as it transmits it. The school through its public relations unit must try to understand the needs and desires of their publics and helps them (the public) understand the entire educational process and how it will contribute to bringing out the best from the students. This will create positive communication, builds confidence in the school system and its goals and establishes avenues of open communication [2].

With the proliferation of public relations units in Ghanaian tertiary institutions, one wonders if the practitioners have changed from the old one-way publicity model or they have embraced the two-way model being propounded by public relations scholars. This study uses two private universities in Ghana (Valley View University, and Islamic University College) to examine the PR practices in tertiary institutions.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Studies all over the world point to the important roles public relations play in educational institutions. [6] posits that the main reason why a lot of universities have established public relations units is to better communicate with their key publics. Similarly, [9] claims that universities generally look to public relations units to manage crises, boost rankings,

increase donations, and carry out a variety of other tasks. [1] also agreed that that Public Relations is very important in dealing with both external and internal publics of the various universities in achieving the institutional goals. Like excellent theorists, [12] suggest that research, strategic planning, effective selection of communication tools and evaluation of programs carried out are the core elements of all successful public relations practice. It is, however, not clear if these elements are present in the public relations practice in Ghanaian educational institutions. In order to feel this gap, this study uses the excellent theory as a point of reference to investigate how two private universities in Ghana (Islamic University College and valley View University) practice public relations.

III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study sought to find out:

1. If the public relations units at the two private universities in Ghana are strategically managed.
2. The kinds of communicator roles the public relations officers at the two private universities performed.
3. How the models of public relations are applied at the two private universities.

IV. THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Theoretical Framework

The Excellence Theory which [1] claimed was founded by International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) in 1984 formed the basis of this study. It is a general theory of public relations (PR) that specifies how public relations is organized, managed and how it (PR) makes an organization more effective. The theory, according to these scholars, also shows how the monetary value of public relations can be determined and the conditions and environments that make PR more effective in an organization. Scholars such as [7] and [8] did further works on the theory and came out with a set of characteristics of an excellent public relations function which they grouped into four categories – empowerment function, communicator roles, integrated function and relationship with other functions, and models of public relations.

The empowerment Public Relations Function involves the senior practitioners in the dominant coalition, managing communication programs strategically and building a direct reporting relationship between the public relations executive and the dominant coalition [8]. According to [8], an organization whose public relations function adheres to the empowerment principle can easily balance its needs with that of publics. This function helps organizations to effectively manage issues and minimize crises.

On the other hand, [8] claim a public relations unit is said to have a communicator role if it has top managers

who know how to manage strategically and who assume a managerial role. These scholars believe that if the public relations manager is part of management, he or she will help the organization make the right decisions.

Excellent public relations units are organized as integrated functions and are separate from other management functions. An integrated public relations unit is able to quickly respond to issues and allocate resources to address problems without delay [8].

Of the four models of public relations, [8] claim that excellent public relations units utilize the two-way symmetrical communication model instead of the public information, press agency, or the two-way asymmetrical models. The two-way symmetrical model uses research to facilitate mutual understanding and communication. According to these scholars, this model helps PR managers to adjust the behaviors of dominant coalitions and bring the public and dominant coalition closer together.

Based on the above principles, the present study sought to find out if the public relations units of BlueCrest College and Valley View University are engaging in excellent public relations practices

B. Related Work

Communications scholars such as [16] claim that public relations practice in universities used to be one-way asymmetrical communication process. These scholars posit that communication practitioners in those days were much concerned with providing accurate but favorable information about their institutions to their publics. Consequently, the major communicator roles performed by the practitioners were media relations. Consistent with this assertion, [3] indicates that in the past, public relations practice at the universities in the former soviet bloc was a mixture of marketing, advertising, and lobbying. This communication style by the universities contradicted the main tenet of excellent theorists who argue that effective public relations should involve two-way symmetrical process.

Recent studies, however, point to the fact that the trend for public relations practice in educational institutions has changed. The findings of a study conducted by [16] on public relations practice at a university in the Czech Republic indicated that the university adopted the two-way symmetrical tactics of research and feedback systems and this helped the institution gain a better understanding of the attitudes of its key publics. Similarly, [11] also claimed that the relationship between a state university he studied and its key publics were strengthened through the university's use of the two-way symmetrical models of public relations. It will be interesting to find out if the public relations units of the Ghanaian universities under study are using the two-way symmetrical models or they are still adhering to the old one-way communication style.

The benefits that communication practitioners stand to gain from excellent principles of public relations practice have made a lot of scholars advocate their (the excellent principles) acceptance and use by all public relations practitioners. Whilst [6] earlier advocated the need for public relations practitioners to have access to the top leaders within their respective institutions, [10] argued that if the universities go a step further to involve public relations practitioners in decision making, it will help minimize crises in the institutions. Other scholars [5][17] stressed the need for all university public relations practitioners to set clearly defined goals, identify key stakeholders, use research on their stakeholders as the basis of drawing their programs and conduct evaluations on every program they have undertaken. These, the scholars believe, will not only enhance the work of the communication practitioners, but will also make them relevant to the institutions they work in. This study, therefore, sought to find out if the public relations practitioners of Islamic University College and Valley View University are following the suggestions of these scholars.

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 [14]. In order to get enough information on how the two tertiary institutions practice public relations, an in-depth interview was used. The choice of qualitative interview for this research was informed by the assertion of [21] 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 [3][14] 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

Wimmer and Dominick [21] claimed that small sample sizes characterize qualitative interviews because results are not generalized to the whole population under study. Based on the assertions of these scholars three respondents were conveniently selected from each of the two institutions for the study. These respondents were made up of the public relations officers, the registrars and any other staff that performs a public relations role in the respective institutions. In all, six persons comprising four males and two females were interviewed in their respective offices. Prior to each interview, the purpose of the study was explained to the participants and their consents were sought before the recording was done. The interviews consisted of a series of open-ended questions which were centered on the four main cardinal points of excellent public

relations - empowerment of the public relations function, communicator roles, organization of communication functions, and public relations models. Each session of the interview lasted between thirty (30) and forty-five (45) minutes. The responses were recorded, transcribed and later coded.

VI. PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

A. Strategic Management of Public Relations

One of the objectives of the study was to find out if public relations units at the two institutions are strategically managed in terms of researched-backed programs, involvement of the decision makers and direct reporting relationship with power brokers in the institutions. The result showed that the public relations units of the two institutions did not engage in any formative research for their programs. They blamed their inability to base their programming on research findings on lack of personnel and fund. The Public Relations Officer of Islamic University College indicated that, "I head a one man department. It is only on few occasions that a colleague from the marketing department comes to lend me a helping hand. We also don't have fund to outsource our research needs so we largely based our programming on informal observations and the little media monitoring I do if I have time." Similarly, the University Relations Officer of Valley View University also claimed that "the department is relatively young so management does not see the need to fund public relations research. They think the media clipping that we do for the four leading newspapers in the country should give us enough information to base our programs on." The two communication officers also said they used meetings and information from their social media platforms and those that the quality assurance officers obtained from the students to gauge their publics' perceptions about the school.

On involvement in decision making, the Public Relations Officer of Islamic University claimed that he was not involved in decision making process and that all their activities were subjected to the approval of management. University Relations Officer (URO) of Valley View University, however, said he was part of management and attended all management meetings where major decisions were taken. The URO claimed as the secretary to the University management, he usually capitalized on his presence at management meetings to make inputs in the decision making process. The two public relations practitioners were both supposed to report to the registrar but were not restricted to have direct access to their respective rectors if the need arose. This affords them the opportunity to discuss pressing issues concerning their departments with the rectors.

B. The Communicator Roles

The study was also interested in finding out the communicator roles practitioners at each institution performed and how the performance of these roles affected the management of public relations. The results showed that the public relations unit at Islamic University College was manned by only one person whilst that of Valley View is made up of two –the URO and an administrative assistant who knew nothing about public relations. One other interesting revelation from the finding is that the communication officers in these two institutions largely performed media relations functions. The major part of their works involved writing press releases, editing news articles, organizing press conferences on newsworthy events in their respective institutions and handling calls from media houses. In the view of the public relations officer of Islamic University College, “the PR unit is basically seen as a publicity arm of the institution; hence, the importance of the unit is only felt by management if the institution’s name is repeatedly being mentioned in the media for the good reasons.” The URO of Valley View University corroborates this view by saying that, “a key aspect of my job description is to ensure the presence of the institution in the key media of the country. So, most of my times are spent on publicity and media related jobs.”

A. The Models of Public Relations Practiced in the Two Institutions

The study also sought to find out the kinds of public relations models that were applied by the educational institutions in their public relations activities. The data revealed that the two private universities predominantly used the public information model. The two communication officers were much concerned with providing accurate but favorable information about their institutions to their publics. This manifested into the dominance of publicity and media relations roles that they performed. In most cases these communication practitioners behaved like journalists in residence who decided what they thought was good about their institutions that the public needed to know about. There was a minimal involvement of the public in the communication process.

In spite of the dominance of the one-way communication process in the two institutions, the data also suggested that the two-way symmetrical communication model was applied in some of the communication activities of the institutions. The URO of the Valley View University claimed that they used meetings and other public forums to solicit the views of students, alumina and other stakeholders and incorporate them into their decision making process at management level. According to him, the concerns raised by students and alumina on the timing and instructional period for the sandwich program his institution runs, for example, was very instrumental in the restructuring process the program went through. To

him, “even though we don’t do any formal research, we don’t gross over the little information we get from our stakeholders at all.” On the part of the PRO of Islamic University, “the views of our publics are so paramount to our institution to the extent that it is always given a slot on the agenda of every management meeting.” He said he had been using the information he gathered from the institutions interactive social media platforms, the quality assurance officer, views expressed by the students during special forums he regularly organized for them and information from his media monitoring to brief management on the perceptions of their stakeholders about their institution. After a thorough discussions of these concerns, major decisions were taken on how to address some of the concerns that their publics raised,

VII. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As indicated earlier, this study is grounded in the excellent theory. Applying the theory to public relations practice at Islamic University College and Valley View University revealed that both institutions fell short of the tenets of the theory. The lack of communication research and heavy reliance of informal ways of evaluating communication programs as revealed in the data pointed to a limited strategic communication management by the two institutions. It also sharply contradicted the principles of effective public relations that scholars such as [5] and Ross [17] urged modern communication practitioners to embrace. Besides these, the situation exposed lack of innovation on the part of both communication practitioners in the two institutions. Instead of relying on marketing research which does not reveal the real concerns of their publics, the PRO of Islamic University College, for example, could have used the students and lecturers in the Journalism and Mass Communication departments of his institution to help him conduct the communication research on his publics. This would have solved the problems of fund and personnel that they claimed were hampering their research process.

Another non-excellent feature of the public relations practice in the two institutions under study was the dominance of the technician role at both institutions. This can be largely attributed to the focus on publicity and media relations that manifested in the practitioners spending much of their times writing and editing press releases, news items, newsletters organizing press conferences among other media related works. A major consequence of the over emphasis on the media was the prevalence of one-way public information model in the communication process of the institutions. The revelation suggests that the two Ghanaian universities studied were still adhering to the age old practice of public relations that [3] identified in the former soviet bloc. This goes against the argument of the excellent theorists such as [8] that effective public relations should focus on building relationship with strategic

publics through communication as such relations can be sustained even during crisis. In as much as the communication officers in the two institutions can be blamed for ignoring the other functions they were supposed to perform, the top executives who made publicity the main job description for these practitioners should also be educated on the roles of public relations in their institution.

It is however worthy of note that a few importance excellence features were partially seen in the PR practice of the two institutions. One such feature was the fact that one of the communication practitioners was included in top-level organizational decision-making process in his institution. This coupled with the unlimited access these officers have to top management executives gave them opportunity to balance the goals of their respective institutions with the concerns of publics. The finding is in line with the suggestion of [6] and [10] that public relations practitioners should have unlimited access to the top leaders within their respective institutions and be part of the decision making process. Similarly, the attempt by the officers to use meetings and social media platforms to incorporate the views of their stakeholders in the decision making process is partially consistent with the two-way symmetrical model that the excellent theorists recommend for effective public relations. It is also similar to the findings of [16] that the adoption of two-way symmetrical tactics of research and feedback systems by a university in the Czech Republic helped the university to better understand the attitudes of its key publics.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Based on the discussions above, one can conclude that the communications units of the two institutions have not fully achieved excellence. A lot more need to be done by both the practitioners and the top executives to ensure high excellence in the communication practice in the two universities.

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