



THE INFLUENCE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS COMMUNICATIONS ON ORGANIZATION'S CUSTOMER IMAGE PERCEPTION IN THE ENERGY SECTOR, KENYA

Dr. Busolo Hillary Oundo,
Alupe University College, Kenya

ABSTRACT

Public Relations functions in any organization are better placed in crafting or designing communication messages that elicit desired responses from the target audiences. This study investigated the influence of public relations communication on organization's customer image perception. A cross sectional survey design was adopted and 381 responded completed a closed ended questionnaire. The findings of this survey may benefit public relations departments and other researcher in the field of Public Relations.

Key Words: Public Relations, Communication, Promotion, image perception,

INTRODUCTION

Public relations communication is an essential and reliable tool for organizational image building process that modern firms view as integral in organizational contact with a range of target audiences. If properly harnessed, tactfully employed and sustained, the rewards can be huge and incremental over time (Kelvin-Iloafu, 2016; Kuvykaite & Piligrimiene, 2013; Khan & Khan, 2012; Agarwal and Garg, 2012; Alhadid & Qaddomi, 2016). For instance, corporate image develops through a process that gathers the sentiments and judgments of various groups who in one way or the other interact with the organization (Pandey & Singh, 2017). Public relations basically communicate with key stakeholder among them, media personnel, local communities, policy developers, and customers. All these stakeholders have the potential to impact the organization's image singly or as a group through the perceptions they hold about the organization (Alhadid & Qaddomi, 2016).

Modern-day firms strive to maintain a cordial working relationship with their customers to guarantee more repeat business and consistent streams of revenue. Public relations communication to customers aims at facilitating and increasing their understanding of the organization, its activities and products, and building a positive image of the organization and its products in their minds (Kuvykaite & Piligrimiene, 2013). These communications are through regular interaction, press releases, print and electronic media communications, and organization of events. Although it is generally appreciated that good public relations enhance corporate images among customers, most organizations are still limited insofar as the incorporation of best practices in public relations is concerned. Consequently, customer perception of their (organization's) image has remained unpredictable and highly variable (Alhadid & Qaddomi, 2016).

Kenya Power has a vibrant public relations department which constantly communicated with the public, gets engaged in promotions of their services and products, offers market education to customers and is involved in corporate social responsibility efforts by the company. The influence public relation has on customer perception of company image has not been documented. Therefore this study investigated the influence of this department with Kenya power as a case study.

Objectives of the Study

- (i) To determine the influence of communication as a result of public relations on organization's customer image perception at Kenya Power, Nakuru Branch
- (ii) To investigate the influence of service promotions as a result of public relation on organization's customer image perception at Kenya Power, Nakuru Branch

Research Questions

- (i) What is the influence of communication as a result of PR on organization's customer image perception at Kenya Power, Nakuru Branch?
- (ii) What is the influence of promotions as a result of PR on organization's customer image perception at Kenya Power, Nakuru Branch?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizations aim to build a rapport and have their activities acknowledged by their stakeholders. They therefore initiate dialogues with key stakeholders selling ideals to them, with the hope that they would legitimize their activities in some way (Vos, Schoemaker and Luoma-aho, 2013). At times this is made easy by the fact that often public relation is considered a credible communication tool.

Firms employing public relations tools should be keen on responsible usage and ethical considerations carefully infused through their entire process (Shin, 2012). This is because, the importance of public relations lies in its ability to reinforce ethical value in decisions made (place, 2010). This in the long run may give feedback in terms of perceptions held by stakeholder, such as customers. Professionals are able to recognize stakeholders' informational needs if regular monitoring and scanning of the environment is done, and hence able to craft ideal communications that may yield desired results.

Organizations strive to build functional customer relations. These relations encompass the entire assortment of practices that are employed for the purpose of managing customer complaints, which ultimately may lead to building long-term sustainable relationships with customers (Bernaya, 2007). Customer relationship management is always a crucial component of public relations practices or it should be. This is because as organizations set out to engage its stakeholders, it should be able to have adequate knowledge gained from previous interactions about them and craft a message that suits them, communicated through the right media (Kuvykaite & Piligrimiene, 2013).

An organization's image embraces all the visual, verbal and behavioural elements that make up the firm. Indeed, organization image should be a dynamic actualization of the Chief Executive Officer's vision, incorporated in the corporation's mission and strategic plan. It should be carefully planned and continually managed in order to support and sustain the corporation's mission. If managed effectively, it should protect the organization against competition from new competitors or from current competitors offering new products and services. Unfortunately, this is usually not the case (Obasan, 2012).

An organization's image embraces all the visual, verbal and behavioural elements that make up the firm. Indeed, organization image should be a dynamic actualization of the Chief Executive Officer's vision, incorporated in the corporation's mission and strategic plan. It can also be referred to as the aggregate of the quality of products and services produced, activities organized and successes achieved by a firm since inception to present day (Alves&Raposo, 2010; Roberts, 2005;Agarwaland Garg, 2012; Chandler et al., 2007; Alhadid & Qaddomi, 2016; Paden & Stell, 2006; Tasci&Gartner,2007).

Organizational image does not only grow from tangible and physical elements related to appearance, but it is also affected by visual, auditory and behavioral elements as well (Alves & Raposo, 2010;Pampaloni, 2010). The image should be carefully planned and continually managed in order to support and sustain the corporation's mission. If managed well, it should safeguard the organization against aggressive new competitors or from current competitors introducing new products and services. Unfortunately, this is usually not the case (Obasan, 2012).

The influence of perceived image has been an issue firms have continuously monitored and worked hard to adjust. Where perceptions of organizations' image have positively impacted customer loyalty, satisfaction and delight, it has been seen in the purchase behaviour displayed by customers, especially repeat purchases they tend to be engaged in. (Alves &Raposo, 2010). Organizational image positively influences product or service quality, prestige, firm's reputation, customer trust and relationship, workforce stability, organization's attractiveness and originality. Moreover organizational image positively affects organizational performance in the long run, employee motivation, identification, stakeholders' co-operation, employee job satisfaction and loyalty.

A strong and positive image of the organization helps not only primarily to increase the confidence of the target group in the organization but also the organization escape from its competitors to increase its value, to occupy itself in internal and external markets, to gain brand value and ultimately influence the behavior of customers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A case study research design was adopted for this study and targeted customers who visit customer care desk at Kenya Power, Nakuru branch. On average 7,324 customers seek services at the customer care desk on weekly basis. The sample frame consisted of customers of Kenya Power. The study used simple random sampling to select customers as they come to the customer care desk and a sample size of 381 was used. A closed ended questionnaire was employed, which respondents filled and was retrieved immediately.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Influence of communication on Organization's customer image

The importance of organization image cannot be over looked in contemporary firms. It is desired by firms that both potential and current customer hold a positive image of the organization. They therefore use range public relations communication strategies to achieve this. The percentages distributions of responses are represented in table 1.

Table 1: Percentage Distribution of Communication Role Responses

Communication Role	Completely Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree Nor Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Completely Agree
When Kenya Power releases information on time to customers, it positively influences their perception on organization`s.	10	16	6	7	12	25	24
When Kenya power communicates precisely to its customers, it positively influences their perception on organization`s image.	8	8	12	17	15	18	22
When a lot of information is communicated to customers by Kenya Power, it makes them understand services offered hence influencing their services offered hence positively influencing their organizational image perception.	11	30	16	10	11	13	9
Kenya power communications to its customers are clear enough to understand, hence influencing	17	27	17	8	13	7	11

positively their organizational image perception.

Kenya power monitors customer understanding of information communicated to them on new rate, eliminating negative information, hence influencing positively their organizational image perception. 20 16 17 19 11 9 8

Kenya power communicates to its customers through variety of media, making information reach most of its customers, hence influencing positively their organizational image perception. 17 37 9 9 11 9 8

Source: Survey Data (2018)

The findings indicates that when information is released on time to customers, it positively influences their perception on organization`s image as 25% strongly agreed and 24 completely agreed. This implies that the management of Kenya Power should ensure that information is released on time to customers. Precise communication by Kenya power positively influences customers perception of the organization`s image. When a lot of information is communicated to customers by Kenya Power, it doesn`t make them understand services offered better and therefore does not influence their perception on the organizations image. The findings also revealed that management of Kenya Power should make efforts to improve the clarity of information released to their customers in order to improve on customers` organizational image perception. The survey showed that customers` perception of Kenya Power`s image may not be influenced by monitoring customers understanding of information communicated to them on new rate, eliminating negative information. Finally, there was an indication that Kenya power did not communicate through variety of media, which may have a negative effect on customers` perception of the organization`s media.

Influence of communication on Organization`s customer image Perception

Promotion through public relations tools gives an organization a much needed professional approach to communicating to desired audiences. The survey investigated this Kenya power and the percentages distributions of responses are represented in table 2.

Table 1: Percentage Distribution of Promotional Influence Responses

Promotional Influence	Completely Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree								
When Kenya power promotes new products, they use variety of media reaching a wide range of customers hence positively influencing their organizations` image perception.	41	21	14	8	7	4	5					
Kenya power promotes its services throughout the year informing greater public hence positively influencing their organization`s image perception.	29	26	12	6	14	8	5					
Kenya power involves customers in their promotion making it easily for them to understand the services offered hence positively influencing their organization`s image perception.	12	17	15	13	19	15	9					
Kenya power promotes all their essential services to customers making them pay more attention improving their understanding of service hence positively influencing their organization`s image perception.	15	7	8	21	26	23	15					
Kenya power trains customers on usage of their products enabling them to effectively use them hence positively influencing their organization`s image perception.	11	17	8	13	15	13	23					
Kenya power educates its customers on the risks of vandalism making them not get exposed to these works hence positively influencing their organization`s image perception.	2	6	9	14	15	23	31					

Source: Survey Data (2018)

The study revealed that management at Kenya Power should increase the variety of media used to promote new products in order to reach more customers and positively impact on the customers' organizational image perception. Kenya Power should also increase the duration in which they promote their services in order to increase public awareness, which will positively impact on the customers' organizational image perception. The management of Kenya Power should make efforts to ensure that customers are involved in promotion programs as this will have a positive impact on their organizational image perception. The findings also revealed that Kenya Power promotes all their essential services to customers and train them on usage of their products. Finally, it emerged that Kenya Power educates its

customers on the risks of vandalism, hence positively influencing their organization`s image perception.

Chi Square Test for Role of Customer Communication

Role of customer communication was evaluated under six structured items. To determine if the customer communication items were related a Chi Square test for independence was conducted. Item frequencies loadings for each of the six items in the customer communication variable are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Chi Square for Customer Communication

Communication Role	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree Nor Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	χ^2	P Value		
When Kenya Power releases information on time to customers, it positively influences their perception on organization`s.	39	61	23	28	44	96	90	2286	0.001
When Kenya power communicates precisely to its customers, it positively influences their perception on organization`s image.	29	30	47	67	56	69	83	1905	0.001
When a lot of information is communicated to customers by Kenya Power, it makes them understand services offered hence influencing their services offered hence positively influencing their organizational image perception.	41	114	61	38	43	49	35	2286	0.001
Kenya power communications to its customers are clear enough to understand, hence influencing positively their organizational image perception.	63	103	64	32	50	28	41	2286	0.001
Kenya power monitors customer understanding of information communicated to them on new rate, eliminating negative information, hence influencing positively their organizational image perception.	76	62	63	72	43	36	29	1905	0.001
Kenya power communicates to its customers	65	143	34	34	41	33	31	2286	0.001

through variety of media, making information reach most of its customers, hence influencing positively their organizational image perception.

Source: Survey Data (2018)

The outcome of the Chi Square test for independence indicated that the customer communication construct items were significantly related with (χ^2 (30, N=381), =1905, $p < 0.001$). The rest of the items in the customer communication variable registered Chi Square value (χ^2 (36, N=381), =2286, $p < 0.001$). Therefore the items in the communication role variable are related.

Chi Square Test for Promotional Influence

Promotional Influence variable was interrogated for independence of its items. A total of six items were captured in the construct. To determine whether promotional influence construct items were related a chi square test for independence was conducted. Item frequencies loadings for each of the six items in the promotional influence variable are depicted in Table 4

Table 4: Chi Square for Promotional Influence

Promotional Influence	Completely Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Nor Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Completely Agree	χ^2	P Value
When Kenya power promotes new products, they use variety of media reaching a wide range of customers hence positively influencing their organizations` image perception.	157	81	52	29	26	17	19	1905	0.001
Kenya power promotes its services throughout the year informing greater public hence positively influencing their organization`s image perception.	111	97	44	24	55	31	19	2286	0.001
Kenya power involves customers in their promotion making it easily for them to understand the services offered hence positively influencing their organization`s image perception.	45	65	57	51	73	56	34	2286	0.001

Kenya power promotes all their essential services to customers making them pay more attention improving their understanding of service hence positively influencing their organization's image perception.	41	18	23	56	69	61	113	2286	0.001
Kenya power trains customers on usage of their products enabling them to effectively use them hence positively influencing their organization's image perception.	41	64	31	49	58	50	88	1905	0.001
Kenya power educates its customers on the risks of vandalism making them not get exposed to these works hence positively influencing their organization's image perception.	7	25	33	52	56	90	118	2286	0.001

Source: Survey Data (2018)

The outcome of the Chi Square test for independence indicated that the promotional influence construct items were significantly related. Items indicating when Kenya power promotes new products, they use variety of media reaching a wide range of customers hence positively influencing their organizations` image perception, and Kenya power trains customers on usage of their products enabling them to effectively use them hence positively influencing their organization`s image perception registered a Chi Square value of (χ^2 (30, N=381), =1905, $p < 0.001$). The rest of the items in promotional influence variable had a Chi Square value (χ^2 (36, N=381), =22867, $p < 0.001$). Therefore the items in the promotional influence variable are related.

CONCLUSION

Based on the above findings the research made the following conclusions: when Kenya Power releases information on time to customers, it positively influences their perception on organization`s image, when Kenya power communicates precisely to its customers, it positively influences their perception on the organization`s image, Kenya Power does not communicate all the information needed to its customers and Kenya Power communications to its customers are not clear enough to understand. The study also concluded that when Kenya power promotes new products, they use variety of media reaching a wide range of customers hence positively influencing their organizations` image perception. Kenya power

does not promote its services throughout the year and does not involve customers in their promotion. Kenya power trains customers on usage of their products enabling them to effectively use.

It was also concluded that Kenya Power trains customers on the various services they offer and this enriches customer knowledge hence influencing positively on customers organizations image and perception, Kenya Power educates its customers on the risks of vandalism and the materials used in educating customers are not simple.

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