

USING PUBLIC RELATIONS TOOLS TO BUILD IMAGE OF TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Public relations is very important in every educational institution. It is believed that the strategic tools employed by public relations could be used to build healthy relationships with the publics and erode unfavourable rumors and stories about private universities in Ghana. The main objective of the study was to identify the tools used by public relations units of private universities in building relationships with its publics in Ghana. The study relied on personal interviews and employed interview guides to collect data from public relations officers and staff of three private universities in Ghana. It emerged from the study that public relations units relied on the universities websites and events as major tools to disseminate information to publics of the universities. The findings further showed that there was minimal use of community relations activities by the private universities to build healthy relationships.

Keywords: Public Relations tools, Image building, Private universities, Ghana

1. Introduction

The brilliant performance of both public and private universities all over the world has laid down the basis for the progress of mankind and has resulted in the development of personality. The strategic role of universities and the fact that the public universities in Ghana could not admit all the qualified students necessitated the establishment of private universities in Ghana to expand educational opportunities to more Ghanaians (Education Reforms in Ghana, 2002).

According to Ghana Educational Reforms report (2002) private universities are key players in our society today. Private universities in Ghana have increased the body of theoretical knowledge and their role in the academic environment is considered as a sign for knowledge revolution. This serves as a backbone for the country's economic growth in this twentieth century. Therefore, the full benefits from private universities can be obtained only if the universities and society are linked together through multiple relationships, i.e. through host of institutions operating in society.

However, the core function of the private universities of training qualified Ghanaians for economic development has not been realized by many Ghanaians. Though, Ghana Educational Reforms report (2002) empowered private universities' to operate in Ghana, people describe students who did not gain admission to public universities as leftovers. According to Dr. Lord Asamoah, Principal of the Garden City University College (GCUC), it was wrong for people to describe students who did not gain admission to public universities as leftovers. He said this during the Third Matriculation of the College at Kumasi. (www.news.myjoyonline.com/education/200911/38299.asp.)

The literature on public relations in terms of relationships and environmental scanning for effective management of institutions has been well documented (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; White & Dozier, 1992; Dozier, 1990). Tianping (2003) indicated that public relations is a basic function of a modern school's management. Kotler (2003) further wrote that the practices of public relations help build good relations with the organisation's various publics and obtain favourable publicity, build up a good corporate image and head off unfavourable rumours and

stories. Therefore, public relations tools effectively employed will enhance the image and relationships of the various stakeholders of the private universities. It must be echoed that a search in the literature shows that the tools employed by public relations to disseminate information to stakeholders of private universities to build relationships has been under researched. This paper was therefore conducted to address this research gap.

The study has the following objectives. (I) To identify the tools utilized by public relations in private universities in building relationships in Ghana. (II) To identify PR relations employed by public relations unit to build good corporate image of private universities in Ghana. The paper is divided into four parts. The first deals with review of literature on public relations including the tools utilized and image building approaches. The second part discusses the methodology for the study. The third part documents findings of the study and the final part concentrates on managerial implications.

2. Literature Review

An investigation into the literature reveals that public relations is not new and its modern day origins in the United States can be traced as far back as 1807 with President Jefferson's address to Congress (Lancaster, 2005). According to Moore and Kalupa (2007) public relations as practiced today is a twentieth century American phenomenon and its fundamental elements of informing people, persuading people and integrating people were basic to earliest society just as they are today. Moore and Kalupa (2007) further asserted that the need for communications among organisations and their publics is attested to by the fact that public relations occupy a dominant role in the economy today and exists as an essential middleman between the corporation and its publics. Hence, public relations functions cannot be integrated into other areas since these functions cannot be managed strategically (Grunig *et al.*, 2006). Public relations is therefore a management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the publics on whom its success or failure depends (Cutlip *et al.*, 2006).

Tools of Public Relations

The tool to monitor and manage opinions of the general public towards an organization is the use of public relations (Moore & Kalupa, 2007). According to Jobber (2001) the objectives of public relations is to manage misconceptions for unfounded opinions not to tarnish the image and operations of an organisation. Wells *et al.*, (2005) also support the view of Jobber (2001) and stressed that public relations objectives focus on creating credibility, delivering information, building positive images, changing stakeholders' attitudes, opinions, or behaviors about a company. Wells *et al.*, (2005) further opined that public relations practitioners have many tools to establish and enhance a positive image of an organisation and its products among its various publics. Hence, the various tools employed by public relations practitioners to deliver messages to the publics of an organisation include speeches, sponsorships, events, corporate advertising, press releases, websites, internal publications and notice boards (Belch & Belch, 2001; Lancaster, 2005; Moore & Kalupa, 2007; Palmer, 2000; Wells *et al.*, 2005).

According to Palmer (2005) sponsorship involves investment in an event or cause in order that an organisation can achieve its objectives. Thus, through events, an organisation can achieve objectives such as increase in awareness level, reputation enhancement and image building. Palmer (2000) additionally states that major events are an opportunity for two-way dialogue between the organisation and the media. Event and sponsorship in the words of Duncan (2002) are designed to create involvement and intensify the marketing communications activities in an organisation. Lancaster (2005) believe that key individuals can be invited to artistic events and such key individuals can be targeted, contacted, entertained and result in long term relationships building. Moore and Kalupa (2007) also were of the view that events play an important part in changing attitudes and opinions. The authors further assert that events provide information that often induces a change of mind. Clow and Baack (2007) further mention that since event is an opportunity for organisation to have a dialogue with their publics, public relations professional should always amplify responsibility for positive outcomes of events and increase the desirable outcome in the eyes of the publics. Therefore, public relations practitioners must recognize the importance of events in transforming passive attitudes into positive opinion on controversial issues.

In the words of Galloway (2005) corporate websites, chat-rooms, email, customer response facilities and electronic news release are viewed as standard aspects of public relations practice. Wells *et al.*, (2005) emphasized that email is a great way for people at separate sites to communicate and encourage communications among employees and permit them to share company databases. Galloway (2005) further puts forward that traditional techniques of public relations are being undermined by the mobile nature of news media and that this requires public relations practitioners to rethink about how they relate to publics when building mutual relationships. In the view of Porter *et al.*, (2007) public relations practitioners who embrace new technologies such as blogging are perceived as having more power and tools to better reach target publics. Taylor and Kent (2007) revealed that the use of the internet in crisis communications is a logical one in that websites are controlled channels through which organisations can communicate directly with the media and the public. Thus, websites provide information regarding the organisation's policies and serve as an interactive tool that enable web users to submit their requests or application forms online.

Wells *et al.*, (2005) believe that the internet has made it possible to present the company's image and story without going through the editing of a gatekeeper. The importance of the internet and of corporate websites as tools for public relations cannot be overemphasized (Hill & White, 2000; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; White & Raman, 1999). Esrock and Leichty (2000) conclude that corporate websites has become important in communicating organisational responsibilities. Therefore, through websites, an organisation can tell its story, reduce the uncertainty of consumers, address multiple stakeholder needs, and help build relationships with its publics. In addition, the universities can use their websites as a community relations tool by promoting direct contact between the universities and the publics.

Building Corporate Image Using Public Relations

Most corporations today places heavy emphasis on externalities such as marketing, branding and image management, and lesser attention on internal communications (Chong, 2007). According to Pickton and Broderick (2005) image is the perception of the company by its publics. The authors emphasized that an organisation have many images, but not just one, because each target

audience is affected by its own interest and contacts. Clow and Baack (2007) stressed that strong company image, which took years to build, may be destroyed in just a few weeks or months by negative publicity and events. Therefore the role of public relations professional is to build strong company image through public relations activities (Clow & Baack, 2007). Wells *et al.*, (2005) mentioned employee relations, media relations, corporate relations, financial relations, public affairs and community relations as types of relations that public relations professionals of an organisation deal with. Dortok (2006) concedes that building an image and a relationship for an organisation, it is crucial to pay more attention to employees as they are considered one of the most trusted information sources of an organisation. Ledingham and Bruning (2000) further indicated that communication becomes a vehicle used by an organisation to initiate, develop, maintain and repair mutually productive relationships. Thus, employees' relations involves internal marketing which communicate an effort aimed at informing employees concerning marketing programs as well as encouraging their support which affect the image of the organisation (Wells *et al.*, 2005). Hutton *et al.*, (2001) argued that companies with extensive corporate communication strategies were more likely to have strong reputations. Thus, once companies focused on managing relationship with its publics; the more likely they were to have a strong reputation. Dolphin (2000) argued that corporate reputation can win competitive advantages for an organisation in a crowded marketplace. Wells *et al.*, (2005) added that a successful relationship between a public relations person, financial institutions, corporate organisations, media and government depends on public relations professional's reputation for honesty, accuracy and professionalism. Therefore, when these qualities are tarnished, the public relations professional cannot function effectively as a liaison between a company and the publics (Wells *et al.*, 2005). Clow and Baack (2007) echod that corporate reputation is extremely vulnerable and extremely valuable hence; good reputation is hard to build and cannot be bought by an organisation.

In the words of Leeper (2004) recognizing community as the context within which organisations operate and recognizing the importance to organisations of establishing strong communities, is a good backdrop for realizing idealistic role of public relations. This view is supported by Post *at al.*, (2002) and pointed to the fact that a company's wealth and its license to operate are

influenced by its relationship with stakeholders. Therefore, active and continuing participation within a community helps to maintain and enhance cordial relationship to the benefit of both the institution and the community at large. Newsom, Turk and Kruckeberg (2004) emphasized that public encompasses any group of people who are tied together however loosely, by some common interest or concern and who have consequences for an organisation. Consequently, lack of community relations activities automatically limits the ability of public relations departments of the private universities to perform their functions effectively in building relationships. Beavers-Moss (2001) conclusively stated that building credibility and trustworthiness are the main issues in public relations. In view of this, public relations practitioners must recognize the importance of events and sponsorships in transforming passive attitudes into positive opinion on controversial issues.

3. Methodology

This study was to explore public relations tools for building image in private universities. The study adopted a qualitative design, using the case study approach to collect data from three private universities; University College (A), University College (B) and University College (C). In the view of Creswell (2002) and Yin (2003) multiple case study design investigates several cases to gain insight into a central phenomenon. Personal interview with key informants was used as the main data collection tool. According to Creswell (1998) qualitative research provides an opportunity for the researcher to assess an issue into detail. Opoku-Amankwa (2009) also conceded that research investigations that are primarily seeking non-numerical forms of data is qualitative in nature. Robson (2002) believes that qualitative data analysis programme offers the researcher fast and easy access to information and speed up the research process and to understand and explain respondents meaning (Morrow & Smith, 2000). Creswell (1998) further opines that qualitative research builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting and makes the study more interesting.

According to Miles and Huberman (1994) qualitative samples tend to be purposive. Therefore, three private universities were purposively selected for the study. The Public relations officers

and staff of the universities were interviewed in their respective offices and each interview lasted approximately one-hour. This gave respondents enough time to express their views on the issue. All interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy and provided rich and sufficient data for the study (Marshall & Roseman, 2006). This view is supported by Opoku-Amankwa (2009) who echoed interviews as a tool is employed to find out individual opinions, ideas, values and beliefs about an issue.

Miles and Huberman (1994) approach of data analysis was employed to analyze the data gathered for the study. As a qualitative study, the main focus was on words rather than numbers (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This view is supported by Bryman (2004) and Gubrium and Holstein (1997) who stated that a qualitatively research occurs through narratives and enable the researcher understand the live experiences of participants. Under this multiple case study design, data was analyzed case by case and followed by cross-case analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989 & Stake, 2006). The researcher understanding each case led to cross-case analysis of public relations tools used for building image among the private universities.

4. Results of the Study

Public Relations Tools Employed

All the interviewees from the three universities echoed that in communicating with employees and students' to build relationships, the public relations departments depend on the universities notice boards placed on campuses, the universities emails in sending information, memos from the public relations units and the universities websites where information on activities and ongoing programmes are posted as the fast and common tools used to communicate with employees and students' to build relationships and enhance the progress of the universities. This findings support the study by Well *et al.*, (2005) that there are a lot of tools that can be used to communicate and build relationships with public relations publics. This means that public relations units of the three universities are not employing just one tool but a combination of tools to target their publics at the same time. Hence, communicating with both employees and students of the universities to build relationships take a multi dimensional approach and strategy.

The study further showed that websites and events are the common tools used by the public relations units of the three private universities to communicate with parents and employers. The tools are used by the university to communicate directly with the media and the publics (Lancaster, 2005; Taylor & Kent, 2007). Through websites and events, an organisation can tell its story, reduce the uncertainty of students in terms of courses to pursue, address multiple stakeholder needs, and present the university's image and story as well as encourage communication among employees, students and share company databases without going through the editing of a gatekeeper (Clow & Baack, 2007; Palmer, 2000, 2005). The findings are consistent with the study by (Well *et al.*, 2005). Therefore, public relations practitioners who embrace tools such as websites and events are perceived as having more power to change attitudes and opinions and provide information that often induces a change of mind to better reach target publics (Porter *et al.*, 2007; Moore & Kalupa, 2007).

Image Building Approach

Interviewees from the three universities' believe that a strong company image, which took years to build, may be destroyed in just a few weeks or months (Clow & Baack, 2007). The respondents further remark that corporate reputation is extremely vulnerable and extremely valuable (Clow & Baack, 2007) hence, good reputation is hard to build and cannot be bought. Interviewees contend that the public relations units have contributed to the image of their universities through the use of websites, organisation of outreach programs and finally invitations to media houses to functions of the universities' like graduations and anniversaries. Pickton and Broderick (2005) asserted that an organisation has many images, but not just one and each target audience is affected by its own interest and contacts.

The study also found out whether the unit undertakes community relations activities. The respondents at both University College (A) and University College (B) explained that the unit does not have any effective community relations activities in place but are occasionally involves in community clean-up exercises. However, a company's wealth and its license to operate are influenced by its relationship with stakeholders (Post *et al.*, 2002). In this case, it is influenced by the company's relationship with communities. At University College (B), the community

relations activities are placed under Education Support Department. What is the connection between public relations and Education Support Department? This development seems to be unconventional and not consistent with the views of Grunig *et al.*, (2006) that integration of the public relations function into other areas means that this function cannot be managed strategically, because communication resources cannot be transferred from one strategic public to another as integrated public relations function can. Consequently, lack of community relations activities automatically limits the ability of public relations department of the private universities to perform their functions effectively in building relationships with the community.

The respondents in all the three universities' conceded that public relations units of the universities' deal with most of the relations mentioned in literature (Wells *et al.*, 2005) but puts a premium on their employees' relations, media relations and public affairs. Therefore, these relations are considered as the most trusted information sources about an organisation (Dortok, 2006 & Well *et al.*, 2005). This reinforces the idea that the publics that public relations interact with frequently encompass any group of people who are tied together by some common interest or concern and who have consequences for an organisation's survival (Newsom, Turk & Kruckeberg, 2004).

Interviewees at all the three universities stated that building good relationships with students, parents and employers of other organisations help obtain favourable publicity, build up a good corporate image and ward off unfavourable rumours and stories (Kotler, 2003). Tianping (2003) asserted that relationship building is a core function of public relations. At both University College (A) and University College (C), interviewees conceded that the units build relationships with students through Students Representative Council (SRC). Respondents state that The Students Representative Council is represented on congregation and matriculation committees, participate in events and communicate to them through the university's website where information on courses of studies, admission requirements, announcements, and highlight major events in the university are displayed (Clow & Baack, 2007; Moore & Kalupa, 2007). At University College (B), respondents further argued that apart from events, the public relations department also sometimes employs sponsorships to build relationship with students. This is in

line with the study by (Palmer, 2005; Moore & Kalupa, 2007). Thus, sponsorship involves investment in event or cause in order that an organisation can achieve objectives such as increased in awareness level, enhance reputation and boost the image of an organisation.

In building relationships with parents, the public relations units of the universities invite parents to participate in special events on campus (Moore & Kalupa, 2007; Lancaster, 2005). Thus, key individuals can be invited to artistic events and result in long term relationships building. The three universities all concluded that events such as matriculations and congregations are very important. There is an argument in the literature that public relations objectives focus on creating credibility, delivering information, and building positive images include involving people with the brand, company or organisation through events and other participatory activities (Wells *et al.*, 2005).

Finally, the study found out how public relations units of the universities build relationships with employers. The respondents at the three universities explained that relationships with employers' hinge on the cordial relationships established since the establishment through sharing of business ideas and believe that this had led to trust building between the universities and organisations. There is sufficient evidence in the literature that good relationship building is grounded on trust between an organisation and its publics (Kotler, 2003). Thus, communication becomes a vehicle used by an organisation to initiates, develops, maintains and repairs mutually productive relationships (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000). Therefore, the importance of building relationship with students, parents and employers is necessary to ward off unfavourable rumours about the universities (Kotler, 2003).

Cross Case Analysis

In this part of the analysis, the three cases of University College (A), University College (B) and University College (C) were compared with each other for issues of commonalities and divergence of public relations tools used for image building strategies. According to Miles and Huberman (1994) it is crucial to understand the dynamics of each particular case before proceeding to cross-case explanations. Table 1 presents a cross-case analysis of the study.

Table 1: Public Relations Tools for Image Building

	University College (A)	University College (B)	University College (C)
Public Relations Tools			
<i>Common tools to communicate with students and employees of the universities</i>	<i>Notice Boards, Emails, Websites, Memos</i>	<i>Notice Boards, Emails, Websites, Memos</i>	<i>Notice Boards, Emails, Websites, Memos</i>
<i>Common tool(s) to communicate with parents and employers</i>	<i>websites, events</i>	<i>websites, events</i>	<i>websites, events</i>
PR Relations in Corporate Image Building			
<i>Types of PR relations used:</i>			
<i>Employee relations</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>YES</i>
<i>Media relations</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>YES</i>
<i>Corporate relations</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>YES</i>
<i>Financial relations</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>YES</i>
<i>Public affairs</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>YES</i>
<i>Community relations activities</i>	<i>Minimal</i>	<i>Minimal</i>	<i>NO</i>
<i>PR relations that the unit puts premium on:</i>	<i>Employees' relations, Media relations, Public affairs</i>	<i>Employees' relations, Media relations, Public affairs</i>	<i>Employees' relations, Media relations, Public affairs</i>
<i>Has PR succeeded in building the Image of the university?</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>YES</i>
<i>Strategies adopted by PR in building relationships with:</i>			
<i>Students</i>	<i>Website, events</i>	<i>Sponsorship, events</i>	<i>Website, events</i>

<i>Parents</i>	<i>Events</i>	<i>Events</i>	<i>Events</i>
<i>employers</i>	<i>Sharing business</i>	<i>Sharing business</i>	<i>Sharing business</i>
	<i>Ideas</i>	<i>Idea</i>	<i>idea, Event</i>

From the cross case analysis of table 1, it could be observed that the three private universities seem to have similar views on public relations tools employed in building relationships in the universities. Additionally, the common tools used to communicate with both employees and students are the notice boards, email, memos and websites. It can be seen that the three universities do not consider community relations as an important relation or tool in building relationships.

Also, when analyzing the corporate image, the three universities are to a large extent using the same public relations strategies or tools in building corporate image. In building relationships with employees, students, parents and employers, the public relations units of the three universities seem to adopt similar programmes. The common tools used by public relations to communicate and build relationships with parents and employers are through the use of websites and events. Hence, websites and events are key marketing ingredients in day to day activities of public relations to position the universities in the topmost mind of their target market. It is therefore not surprising that well designed websites and colourful events such as matriculations and graduations ceremonies have now become an integral part of private universities in Ghana.

5. Managerial Implications

From the study, the public relations units of private universities studied are building the image of the universities; however, tools that can bring the universities face to face with their publics to encourage two-way dialogue to build relationships have not been fully utilized. The study is therefore an indispensable ingredient for private universities in Ghana.

The study revealed that for private universities to build relationships needed to obtain favourable publicity, build up a good corporate image to ward off unfavourable rumours and stories (Kotler,

2003), the private universities therefore need to put community relations activities in place to build relationships and ward off negative impact on the image of the universities. Palmer (2005) and Duncan (2002) believe that sponsorship which is an investment in an event or a cause can help an organisation to increase its awareness level, enhance reputation and image and build relationships for an organisation.

Moreover, the study found that the image of an organisation may be seen by the universities publics from different dimensions. Pickton and Broderick (2005) assert that an organisation has many images, but not just one and each target audience is affected by its own interest and contacts. Hence, there is the need for private universities to showcase where they have positive image in terms of academic performance, quality staff both teaching and administration, academic infrastructure as well as flexible and competitive programmes to make them market leaders but not market followers in the competitive academic market today.

Lastly, the results of the study further showed that websites and events are used to communicate and build relationships with students, employees, parents and employers. Therefore, websites and events have become invaluable assets of the universities. Using the websites and events will enable the public relations departments to communicate effectively with their stakeholders (Taylor & Kent, 2007). It follows then that, training of public relations practitioners on the use of intranet, extranet and internet is critical for proactive public relations professionals' job. Thus, websites and events have the potential of enabling organisations to communicate directly with the mass media and the public whom the success or failure of the universities depends.

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