

PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF N-POWER IN BENUE STATE

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Abstract

This study; public perception of the role of Public Relations in the Implementation of N- Power in Benue State, sought to find out the role of public relations in the implementation of N-Power and how the public perceived the roles. The methodology adopted in the study was survey. Questionnaire and interview were used as the research instruments for data collection. The sample size of 386 was statistically determined using the Araoye's formula from the population of 10, 312. The study employed a multistage sampling technique in administering research instruments. Findings revealed that public relations were needed when relating with other agencies charged with the responsibility of implementing N-Power in the state as well as when communicating with the media; N-Power beneficiaries; and employees. The study also found that role public relations played in the implementation of N-POWER in Benue State to include helped in publicizing N-Power programme; assisted the news media in coverage of N-Power and government activities; disseminated information on various agencies' activities about N-Power to beneficiaries; increased the internal cohesion of agencies involved in N-Power programme; increased the agencies' sensitive to its public's or N-Power beneficiaries and mobilized support for the agencies of government involved in N- Power programmes. The study concluded that public perception of the role of public relations in the implementation of N-Power was negative. This is because of the unfriendly relationship that exist between beneficiaries and government, also government is perceived as been nonchalant in handling N-Power as well as lack of dialogue and public relations practitioners are not as trustworthy. The study, therefore, concluded that, public relations strategies were adopted in the implementation of N-POWER in Benue State to a little extent. Based on the conclusion drawn, the study recommended among others that for effective implementation of the N-Power, PR should be adopted as core management function to build credibility amongst beneficiaries and management of the N-Power and special attention must be paid to performance, ability of government to deliver service and keep to agreements as expected and demanded by N-Power beneficiaries.

Keywords: Public Relations, Perception, N-Power, Beneficiaries

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Introduction

Development is essential so much so that every nation of the world is pursuing with vigor, particularly the Third World nations. As a result, several or successive government have been making policies and programmes that will help them develop. In Nigeria for instance, programmes and policies that have been made by successive administrations to achieve national development are Green Revolution, War Against Indiscipline, Structural

Adjustment Programme, Vision 2010, National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy and 7-point Agenda (Osisioma, 2018). The administration of President Muhammad Buhari also made several development programmes/policies. One of such programmes is Transformation Agenda, with its core objective of improving the living standard of Nigerians (Michael, 2012). The Transformation Agenda is based on a summary of how the Federal Government hoped to deliver in terms of projects, programmes, and key priority policies, from 2011 to 2015 coordinated by the National Planning Commission (NPC). A lot of strategies are used in achieving success in governmental programmes. One of such strategies is effective communication. Sambe (2007) stressing the importance of communication in any programme asserts: Communication occupies a very important space in human existence. Indeed, it is at the core of all human actions and activities since humans are no islands unto themselves, the necessity to interact continuously requires involvement in one form of communication or the other. Perhaps, it is because of the centrality of communication in all of society's endeavours that our world is known today as information society. Ojo (1995) in Albert (1999) asserts that our information society is one in which economic and cultural life is critically dependent on information. It is a society in which information has become the main product or essential to other products.

Even though the famous statement of Thomas Jefferson that the press is the best instrument for enlightening the mind of man and improving him as rational, moral and social being has clearly demonstrated the importance of the media in information dissemination. Many at times, government feels putting their programmes and policies on radio, television and newspaper is enough information (cited in Jefkins, 1972). Since public relations is a communication tool to manage relationship, it is used in achieving government programmes and policies. Nwosu (1995) asserts that the term government means a wide spectrum concept that includes local government, state governments, federal governments, government ministries, parastatals, agencies or organizations. Writing on public relations in government, Black (1989) states that public relations in a government department has two main tasks: to give regular information on policy, plans and achievements of the department; to inform and educate the public on legislations and all matters that affects the daily life of citizens. In agreement with Black, Nwosu (1995) asserts that public relations department has the duty of educating the citizenry on their civic rights, responsibilities and duties, especially in a developing country like Nigeria with high rate of illiteracy and other problems. He further state that all these are in addition to the department's crucial internal function of advising the chief executive and other top administrative/management staff on public opinions, attitudes reactions or possible reactions to government policies, programmes, projects and actives. Public relations activities in government include; planning, execution, monitoring, coordination and evaluation of all major information and public enlightenment campaigns on issues, problems, projects and programming which the government establishment needs to run for mobilization and mass education purpose. Harlow, 1976 as cited in Nwosu and Nana (2004) described public relations as; a distinctive management function that which helps to establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and corporation between an organization and its publics. It involves the management of problems or issues, helps management to keep informed on and be responsive to public opinion. Defines and emphasis the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; help management keep abreast with and effectively utilize charge, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends and use research and communication techniques as its principal tool.

Statement of Problem

Public relations is a management communication tool organizations employ to establish a good and favourable image and achieve organizational goals. It is relevant to both commercial and non-commercial organizations. As a result, public relations is also a communication tool which is used by the government around the world in managing their affairs (Nwosu, 1995). While the government of President Muhammad Buhari introduced a development oriented programme known as N-power, effective implementation of this programme remained uncertain. As a result, the role of public relations is seen as veritable tool for effectiveness and efficiency in the implementation of N-POWER across the states in Nigeria. However, the public perception of these roles affects not only the credibility but limits the effectiveness of any efforts aimed at maintaining a harmonious relationship between organizations and their various public. This explains why White and Park (2010, p.319) argued that "perceptions about public relations affect the perceived credibility of the profession and

influence whether people see public relations as a value to society. Negative mass-mediated images of public relations can be explained by second-level agenda setting and cultivation theories. Since mediated perceptions are cumulative, a social reality of public relations emerges upon which assumptions and judgments about the profession are made". It is against this backdrop that this study is set out to assess public perception of the role of public relations in the implementation of N-power in Benue State.

Objectives of Study

The objectives of the study include:

1. To identify areas public relations is needed in the implementation of N-POWER in Benue State.
2. To determine the role public relations played in the implementation of N-POWER in Benue State.
3. To establish the public perception of the role of public relations in the implementation of the N-POWER in Benue state.
4. To ascertain the possible factors that militate against the role of public relation in the implementation of N-POWER in Benue State.

Research Questions

1. In what areas is public relations needed in the implementation of N-POWER in Benue State?
2. What roles do public relations play in the implementation of N-POWER in Benue State?
3. What is the public perception of the role of public relations in the implementation of the N-POWER in Benue state?
4. What are the possible factors that militate against the role of public relation in the implementation of N-POWER in Benue State?

Literature Review

Public Relations

Public relations as a concept mean different things to different people. This thinking propelled Orraca-Tetteh (1986) to say: "Perhaps the most baffling, challenging and yet frustrating aspect of public relations is simply how to definite it." Nevertheless, a number of public relations experts have made attempts at defining the concept to suit their ideological inclinations. Thus, Orraca-Tetteh (1986, p.17) identifies four types of public relations definitions. They are descriptive; prescriptive; sub-inclusive, and inclusive

A descriptive definition to Oracca-Tetteh (1986) is one that asserts that something is or means. It pontificates; it brooks no contradiction, as it were. Prescriptive definition gives a personal rather than "standard", "take it or leave it meaning". It might be identified by expressions such as: "By PR, I mean (or understand) the planned..." The sub - inclusive definition implies something. It is far less categorical although it is not as personal as the descriptive. The full-fledged inclusive definition offers in a tentative way criterion by which the concept is to be recognized. It assumes that the inclusion of other worthwhile criteria.

Examples of the four types of public relations definition are imperative here. For the descriptive definition, majority of public relations definitions emphasize it. One of such definitions is that of the Institute of Public Relations (IPR) which sees public relations as "the deliberate and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organization and its public" (cited in Kadima, 1999, p. 209). Another definition of public relations, descriptive in nature, is the Mexican Statement, which states.

The Role of Public Relations

In describing the role of public relation, Palaniappan and Ramachandraiah (2008) argued that public relations is establishing the relationship among the two groups (organisation and public); art or Science of developing reciprocal understanding and goodwill; it analyses the public perception & attitude, identifies the organisation policy with public interest and then executes the programmes for communication with the public. For them, effective public relations can create and build up the image of an individual or an organisation or a nation. At the time of adverse publicity or when the organisation is under crisis an effective public relation can remove the "misunderstanding" and can create mutual understanding between the organisation and the public.

In general, public relations professionals can be communication managers who organize and integrate communication activities, or they can be communication technicians who primarily write and construct messages. Research in this area led to the identification of four specific roles: the technician role and three types of communication managers.

Establishment of N-Power Programme

N-Power is a scheme set up by the President of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari since 8 June 2016, to address the issues of youth unemployment and help increase social development. The scheme was created as a component of National Social Investment Program, to provide a structure for large scale and relevant work skills acquisition and development and to ensure that each participant will learn and practice most of what is necessary to find or create work.

N-Power was created on 8 June 2016 to address the issues of youth unemployment and help increase social development. The scheme is created for unemployed graduates and non-graduates between the ages of 18 and 35. It is a paid programme of a two-year duration, aimed at engaging beneficiaries in their states of residence. On 13 July 2019, Nigerian federal government disclosed that they have spent a total of ₦279b since they started paying the scheme beneficiaries from December 2016 to June 2019. The scheme currently has six categories namely; N-Teach, N-Health, N-Agro, N-Build, N-Creative and N-Tech. N-Teach and N-Health are available to only graduates who must have completed the mandatory one-year NYSC programme, while N-Agro, N-Build, N-Creative and N-Tech is available to graduates and non-graduates.

Theoretical Framework

This research will be anchored on the stakeholder theory and the two-way symmetric and Jefkins' Public Relations Transfer Process models will be use as supportive models. Stakeholder theory was propounded by Edward Freeman in 1984 in his book *Strategic management: A Stakeholder Approach*. Freeman (1984) identifies and models the groups which are stakeholders of a corporation, and both describes and recommends methods by which management can give due regard to the interests of those groups. In short, it attempts to address the "principle of who or what really counts. In the traditional view of a company, the shareholder view, only the owners or shareholders of the company are important, and the company has a binding fiduciary duty to put their needs first, to increase value for them. Stakeholder theory instead argues that there are other parties involved, including employees, customers, suppliers, financiers, communities, governmental bodies, political groups, trade associations, and trade unions. Even competitors are sometimes counted as stakeholders - their status being derived from their capacity to affect the firm and its stakeholders.

Two-way Symmetric Model

This model of public relations was propounded by Grunig and Hunt in 1984. The model highlights a two-way communication system which should exist between the organization and its publics to achieve an objective. Grunig and Hunt further stated that dialogue exists instead of monologue. Under this condition, both management and publics will change somewhat after a public relations effort. The practitioner's role is to bring the two groups together to make communication possible so that they understand the position of each other. Grunig and Hunt (1984) outline the features of two-way symmetric model as follows:

- i. Relies on honest and open two-way communication and mutual give-and-take rather than one-way persuasion.
- ii. Focuses on mutual respect and effects to achieve mutual understanding.
- iii. Emphasizes negotiation and a willingness to adapt and make compromises
- iv. Requires organizations engaging in public relations to be able to make significant adjustments in how they operate in order to accommodate their publics.
- v. Seems to be used more by non-profit organizations, government agencies and heavily regulated businesses such as public utilities than by competitive profit- driven companies.

Public Relations Transfer Process Model

The Public Relations Transfer Process Model was propounded in 1988 by Frank Jefkins, a United Kingdom based Public Relations expert. It unveils the imperative of using effective communication by Public Relations practitioners to change negative attitudes of hostility, prejudice, apathy, and ignorance to a positive state of sympathy, acceptance, interest and knowledge. Attitude as Edeani in Salu (1993) puts it, "is one of the most complex psychological processes in human society...The construct is regarded as persons predisposition to evaluate a person, group, organisation, object or an issue in a consistent favourable or unfavourable manner." However, Jefkins (1998) explains that it is the duty of Public Relations practitioners to employ special methods, techniques, strategies and tactics available to them through effective communication to change the attitude of people that are negative towards an organisation, issue, government and a person to a favourable state.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design adopted in this study was the survey method. The population of the study comprise the staff in the information/public relations unit of Benue State ministries, agencies, parastatals and N-POWER beneficiaries. Benue State government has total of 1,512 staff strength in the of information/public relations units of ministries, agencies and parastatals while N-POWER has 8,800 beneficiaries in Benue State (official figure of Benue State staff and N-POWER beneficiaries from the official document of Head of Service, Benue State, 2019). Therefore, the population of the study is 10, 312. A sample size of 300 was chosen for this study.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Table 1: Areas public relations was needed in the implementation of N-Power in Benue State

Options	Frequency	Percentage
When communicating with the media	49	20.0
When relating with other agencies charged with the responsibility of implementing N-Power in the state	136	55.2
When relating between the staff or officials of the courts for effective communication	54	22.0
All the above options	7	2.8
Total	246	100

Source: Field survey, 2024

Data contained in table 1 show that 49 (20.0%) respondents indicated when communicating with the media as arias public relations was applied in the implementation of N-Power, 136 (55.2%) respondents indicated when relating with other agencies charged with the responsibility of implementing N-Power in the state, 54 (22.0%) respondents indicated when relating between the staff of ministries and N-Power beneficiaries for effective communication and seven (2.8%) indicated all the above options. Most respondents indicated when relating with other agencies charged with the responsibility of implementing N-Power in the state.

Table 2: Role public relations played in the implementation of N-Power in Benue State

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Helped in publicizing N-Power programme	26	10.5
Assisted the news media in coverage of N-Power and government activities	21	8.5

Disseminated information on various agencies' activities about N-Power to beneficiaries	16	6.5
Increased the internal cohesion of agencies involved in N-Power programme	23	9.3
Increased the agencies' sensitive to its public's or N- Power beneficiaries	11	4.5
Mobilized support for the agencies of government involved in N-Power programmes	57	23.2
All the above options	92	37.4
Total	246	100

Source: Field survey, 2024

Data contained in table 2 show 26 (10.5%) respondents indicated helped in publicizing N-Power programme, 21 (8.5%) respondents indicated that public relations assisted the news media in coverage of N-Power and government activities, 16 (6.5%) respondents indicated that public relations disseminated information on various agencies' activities about N-Power to beneficiaries, 23 (9.3%) respondents indicated that public relations increased the internal cohesion of agencies involved in N-Power programme, 11 (4.5%) respondents indicated increased the agencies' sensitivity to its publics' or N-Power beneficiaries, 87 (23.2%) indicated mobilised support for the agencies of government involved in N-Powerprogramme and 92 (37.4%) respondents indicated all the above options. More respondents indicated all the above options this implies that public relations played the following roles in the implementation of N-Power; helped in publicizing N- Power programme; assisted the news media in coverage of N-Power and government activities; disseminated information on various agencies' activities about N-Power to beneficiaries; increased the internal cohesion of agencies involved in N-Power programme; increased the agencies' sensitive to its public's or N-Power beneficiaries and mobilized support for the agencies of government involved in N-Power programmes.

Table 3: Public perception of the role of public relations in the implementation of Sure- P in Benue State

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Positive	94	38.2
Negative	152	61.8
Total	246	100

Source: Field survey, 2023

Data contained in table 3 show 94 (38.2%) respondents had a positive perception about the role of public relations in the implementation of N-Powerprogramme in Benue State, 152 (61.8%) respondents had negative perception about the role of public relations in the implementation of N-Power in Benue State. Most respondents had a negative perception about the role of N-Power in Benue state which implies that respondents were not impressed with the roles played.

Table 4: Factors informed public perception implementation of N-Power in Benue State of the role of public relations in the implementation of N-Power in Benue State

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Government is committed about N-POWER	10	4.1
Lack of balanced or two-symmetric flow of information	21	8.5
Lack of dialogue	48	19.5
Public relations practitioners are not as trustworthy as journalists	41	16.7
None of the above	42	17.1
All of the above	84	34.1
Total	246	100

Source: Field survey, 2024.

Data contained in table 4 show the reason for respondents perception about the role of public relations thus; 31 (12.6%) respondents indicated that government is committed about N-Power, 21 (8.5%) respondents indicated lack of balanced or fro-symmetric flow of information, 48 (19.8%) respondents indicated lack of dialogue, 41 (16.7%) respondents indicated public relations practitioners are not as trustworthy as journalists, 42 (17.1%) respondents indicated none of the above options as the reasons for their perception, and 84 (34.1%) respondents indicated all the above options. Most respondents indicated all the options which suggest that although respondents had a negative perception as their still believed that government was committed about N-Power. However, respondents gave reasons thus; lack of dialogue and public relations practitioners are not as trustworthy.

Discussion of Findings

Findings from the study revealed that public relations was needed when relating with other agencies charged with the responsibility of implementing N-Power in the state as well as when communicating with the media; N-Power beneficiaries; and employees. This is evident in Tables 5 and 6 in addition from the views from the interviews. The implication of the above findings is that public relations has been used in the management of N-POWER to implement the programme in Benue State. Also, this suggests that public relations was needed to engaged employees, develop public trust through media contact. This denotes that employee and media relations were used in addressing the areas public relations was needed in the implementation of N-Power in Benue State. This finding is in tandem with Offonry's (1985, p.4) observations study that:

Media relations is a deliberate policy action and varied communications activity taken by an organization with a views to winning and sustaining the confidence and goodwill of various sections of the mass media, thus removing at least minimizing the chances of misrepresentation, misquotation, distortion of facts and unfounded criticism by such organization.

The finding also agrees with Black's (1989, p.139) observation that "employee relations embrace almost everything other than pay which encourage employees to make their maximum contribution to productivity and the prosperity of the company." Also the findings agree with Hule (2012) that shareholder relations, employee relations, media relation were adopted by Sanusi in his banking sector reforms. Findings also agree with Akande (2006) that communication is the major road public relations plies to success. For Bernstein and Rakowitz (2012, p.21), public relations is communication, therefore "the cardinal point to bear in mind is that public relations is fundamentally concerned with people and their relationship with each other." Therefore, in public relations communications is believed to be anchor of the profession.

Also finding from the study reveals that the role public relations played in the implementation of N-POWER in Benue State to include helped in publicizing N- Power programme; assisted the news- media in coverage of N-

Power and government activities; disseminated information on various agencies' activities about N-Power to beneficiaries; increased the internal cohesion of agencies involved in N-Power programme; increased the agencies' sensitive to its public's or N-Power beneficiaries and mobilized support for the agencies of government involved in N-Power programmes; to provide both state government and N-Power beneficiaries the information they need for making decisions of mutual interest; and facilitation of issues or problem-solving.

Conclusion

The study established public perception of the role of public relations in the implementation of N-Power was negative. This is because of the unfriendly relationship that exists between beneficiaries and government, also government is perceived as been nonchalant in handling N-POWER as well as lack of dialogue and public relations practitioners are not as trustworthy. The study also concluded that there are factors militating against the role of public relations in the implementation of N-POWER in Benue State. These factors included; lack of professionalism in the practice of public relations, lack of manpower/training/equipment, government negative attitudes towards public relations practice, lack of functional public relations units in government establishments, overbearing influence of government, non-existence of long term plans to adopt public relations as a core strategy for management to build credibility amongst their staff, government inability to involve public relations/information officers during policy formulation.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusion drawn, the following are recommendations of the study:

1. In order for the role of public relations to be effective, special attention must be paid to performance, ability of government to deliver service and keep to agreements as expected and demanded by N-POWER beneficiaries taking into consideration such factors as regular, up-to-date payment of stipends and regular provision of information concerning the programme, through beneficiaries e-mail, text messages, organization website, social network (facebook, YouTube, Whatapp, twitter), radio and television..
2. Money should be voted to the public relations unit to enable it carry out its duties.
3. The Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) should prescribe standard guidelines and rules to be used as benchmark for government public relations practitioners to ensure uniformity and average professional conduct.
4. Ethical conduct should be guaranteed for government public relations practitioners through regulatory measures to ensure that professional code of ethics, professional code of conduct and code of standard are being complied with by all government establishments.

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