

# PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICES: “A STUDY OF SELECTED PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN GHANA”

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## **Abstract**

*It is a well-known fact that private universities have been rendering important services to the nation but the public seems not to have understood the role and mission of the private universities and consider them as an avenue for money making by admitting students who do not make the entry requirements to public universities and also employ unqualified personnel. In view of this, the private universities are being perceived negatively and this perception has affected their image in Ghana, thereby calling for an effective public relations department to correct this negative perception. The objectives of the study were to investigate public relations practices in private universities in Ghana and to identify the challenges faced by the public relations unit of private universities. Personal interview, using an interview guide, was used to collect data from public relations managers and staff of three private universities in Ghana. The study revealed that public relations do not perform their roles effectively in the private universities because they lack qualified staff and logistics to enable them perform effectively. The findings again showed that public relations units of the private universities were not represented at the council which is the highest decision-making body in the universities to enable them disseminate timely management decisions to the university's publics. The strategic implications of these findings are further highlighted in the paper.*

**Keywords:** Public Relations practices, Private universities, Ghana

## **INTRODUCTION**

Civilized and developing societies need universities because they provide the necessary skills for economic development. Today, the increasing number of private universities in Ghana is seen by many Ghanaians as a blessing for helping the nation to train qualified students who could not gain admission to the state universities. Furthermore, private universities foster equity and through the dissemination of knowledge and ideas by way of educating qualified students who could not gain admission to public tertiary institutions because of inadequate infrastructure such as residential and academic facilities. This has helped to reduce pressure on the state owned universities and made it possible to expand educational opportunities to many Ghanaians.

Additionally, private universities have made it possible for more public resources to be targeted at the disadvantaged, the poor and the needy in the society (Education Reforms in Ghana, 2002). This has helped to produce manpower to spearhead the nation's socio-economic and technological development. Formally, few people gained admission to public universities resulting in fewer graduate populations in the country. But the establishment of private universities in the country has helped in improving the situation by increasing the graduate population for industry and government. Moreover, private universities are economically and socially contributing to their community, its economy and their own prosperity and quality of life. The activities touch virtually every aspect of lives and the prosperity of the communities they live in.

Despite the fact that private universities in Ghana have been mandated by the National Accreditation Board to provide tertiary education and skills training to qualified candidates desiring to avail themselves of tertiary education for skills acquisition and training and overall personal development (Education Reforms in Ghana, 2002), sections of the public seem not to have misunderstood the role and mission of the private universities and for that matter keep on seeing private universities as an avenue for money making. The perception is extended to include the quality of students they hire and also the quality of academic and administrative staff they employ. In view of this, the private universities are being perceived negatively and this perception has affected their image in Ghana.

However, it is a well-known fact that private universities have been rendering important services to the nation. It is estimated that out of the several thousands of candidates who qualify each year for admission into the existing Ghanaian public universities, only between 25%-30% of the total number gain admission ([www.mucg.edu.gh/au\\_aboutas.html](http://www.mucg.edu.gh/au_aboutas.html)).

The practice of public relations in building good corporate image in the corporate world has been well documented in literature (Nakra, 2000). According to Grunig and Grunig (2006) the practice of public relations should help an organization interact with the social and political components of its environment, which consists of publics that affect the ability of the organization to accomplish its goals. Therefore, effective public relations practices will help position and affect the image and operational activities of the private universities and build relationships with the various stakeholders of private universities. Our search through the literature indicates that the role of public relations in private tertiary educational institutions has been under researched. The current paper was therefore conducted to address this research gap.

The study has two major objectives. (I) To identify the role of public relations in promoting the image of private universities in Ghana. (II) To identify the challenges public relations managers face in private universities. The rest of the paper will proceed as follows. The next section continues with a review of the pertinent literature of public relations including the challenges of

public relations practices in private universities. The next section deals with the methodology for the study. This is followed by the findings of the study and discussions. The final section deals with managerial implications, limitations and directions of future research.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A review of modern public relations history gives a number of definitions. Cutlip, Center and Broom (2000) define public relations as a management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends. Moore and Kalupa (2007) indicated that 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. The authors further emphasize that the effective tool to monitor and manage opinion of the general public is through extensive use of public relations practices. Wells et al (2005) opine that public relations is a management function practiced by a wide range of organizations, companies, governments, non-profit organizations, the educational system, labor unions, politicians, organized sports, and the media.

### ***Role/Practice of Public Relations***

Kotler and Mindak (2000) argued that public relations plays a greater role in academia, but a relatively reduced role in commercial organizations. Newson and Carrell (2001) also asserted that public relations director should serve as a spokesperson for the organization and overseer of the entire public relations program. According to National School Public Relations Association (2010) educational public relations function or practice helps improve the programs and services of an educational organization. Educational public relations programs therefore assist in interpreting public attitudes, identify and help shape policies and procedures in the public interest, and carry on involvement and information activities which earn public understanding and support (National School Public Relations Association, 2010). National School Public Relations Association (2010) further mentioned the following as the functions or practices of educational public relations: counseling, media's liaison, communications planning, publicizing students and staff achievements, community relations liaisons and information station. According to Jobber (2001) one of the functions of public relations is to manage misconception so that unfounded opinions do not tarnish the image or operations of the organization. Well et al., (2005) also asserted that public relations functions are designed by planners to make changes in the public's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours related to a company, brand or organization.

Peyronel and Lawniczak (2000) also state that literature in higher education public relations affirms that senior public relations administrators should be involved in institutional decision making at colleges and universities and observe that reserving a seat at the corporate boardroom tables for public relations executives and involving them in strategy development, would be a logical first step for corporate reputation building (Nakra, 2000). This indicates that public relations is a basic function of a modern university's management. Pirozek and Heskova (2003) examined public relations practice of a university in the Czech Republic and found that two-way symmetrical tactics of research and feedback systems helped the university gain a better understanding of the attitudes of its key publics. Tengilimoglu et al., (2008) believe that public

relations activities for all organizations can have an important effect on consumer decision-making when buying goods or services.

### ***Tools of Public Relations***

Palmer (2005) emphasized that a wide range of public relations tools are available and suitability of each tool depends on the promotional objective. Belch and Belch (2001) echoed that public relations uses a variety of tools including special publications, participation in community activities, fund-raising, and sponsorships of special events, advertising and public affairs activities to enhance an organizational image. Well et al., (2005) also described categories of public relations tools and stressed that the tools are best suited to create awareness of an organization and its services depending on the amount of control the company has in its communication. The tools are described as controlled (e.g. House ads, Public service ads, Publications, Photographs, Displays, exhibits), uncontrolled (e.g. News release, Press conferences, Talk and interview shows, Public service announcements) and semi-controlled (e.g. Electronic communication (web sites, chat rooms), Special events and sponsorship, Word of mouth). Lancaster (2005) states that companies that use television as a medium of communication stand the chance of achieving a high level of impact on their customers or public due to its visual nature. The author observed that during a television program, individual's explanation regarding issues relating to their companies could be supported with either products or footage of the company's participation in a sponsored event. This, the author argued, has the ability to erase any erroneous impressions about such companies. Lancaster (2005) further mentions exhibition as one of the potential tools for creating the opportunity for public relations officers as well as marketing communicators to come into face-to-face contact with desired targeted audience or visitors. The author claimed that since visitors treat exhibitions as a shop window and an opportunity to gather technical information, the public relations officer would have the opportunity to explain and provide all the necessary information that can inspire confidence and trust in an organization by the customer or the targeted public and build relationship.

Clow and Baack (2007) also argued that the internet could be used as a major tool of public relations to help combat negative word of mouth. Khalil (2004) also asserted that the explosive growth of mobile computing and wireless networks has helped educational institutions stay at the forefront of the changing world. Audu (2006) revealed that the Internet has many benefits in the academic cycle as it provides around the clock access to global sources of information. Thus internet and website provide a faster, broader reach for public relations practitioners to publish company press releases, background information, introduce new products or services and provide promotional information for an organization. This view is supported by Yumba (1997), Ojedokun and Owolabi (2003); Adomi, Omodeko and Otolola (2004). Thus, internet has become an invaluable tool for teaching, learning, and research. In their study, Wright and Hinson (2010) found that facebook and the website were the most current media used for public relations

messages. Therefore, organizations must be vigilant and realize the power of the Internet and website and what it can do to an organization's reputation.

### ***Challenges of Public Relations***

Like all forms of marketing communication, public relations also comes with its special challenges. An investigation into the literature reveals that the major problems faced by the public relations unit of many organizations are lack of qualified personnel, operational space, recognition and budget (Bruning and Ralston, 2001; Jobber, 2001; Kotler, Wong, Saunders and Armstrong, 2005; ). Jefkins (2000) argued that the ideal structure of the public relations department should be independent and directly responsible to the chief executive officer (CEO). Grunig et al., (2006) also asserted that integration of the public relations functions into other areas means that the functions cannot be managed strategically. Thus, if the public relations officer is placed in any other department its functions will be strictly limited. Therefore, the public relations officers in an institution, if accorded the needed recognition they deserve by management, a seat will be reserved at corporate boardroom tables for their involvement in strategy development (Nakra, 2000).

In the **words of** Kotler et al., (2005) public relations still captures only a small portion of the overall marketing budgets of most firms, though public relations is considered as an important brand building tool. Bruning and Ralston (2001) also wrote that the practice of public relations at most universities has been relegated to a single office concerned primarily with managing institutional reputation. By this assertion, one could say that public relations functions or practices will be limited in accomplishing its objectives especially in private universities which rely solely on internally generated funds to run the affairs of the institutions. Similarly, Heskov and Pirožek (2003), on the other hand, postulate that higher educational institutions need to develop public relations capacities to build proactive public relations departments. This will require recruiting qualified staff and training them to perform their tasks in order to improve the image of the institutions. Cutlip et al., (2006) further remarked that the function or role of public relations will be useful only if management wants it, but if management perceives this function as not something crucial for the company, then this function will not have a strategic position in the company and its contribution will be limited. Therefore, it could be deduced from the above that lack of recognition of the public relations unit may manifest itself in lack of resources to keep the unit operational and functional to communicate timely information to the publics of the university.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the functions, tools used and special challenges faced by public relations in private universities in Ghana. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, a multiple case study approach was deemed appropriate to answer the research objectives. Yin (2003) argues that a case study is more convincing since the researcher gathers a larger amount of data to support the solidness of the study. Blaxter et al., (2001) also opined that data in case studies are drawn from people's experiences, which allow researchers to show the complicity of real life circumstances. Multiple case designs normally follow replication logic as opposed to a sampling logic commonly used in a survey which requires an operational enumeration of the

entire universe or a pool of potential respondents and then a statistical procedure for selecting a specific subset of respondents to be surveyed (Yin, 2003). In order to gain a deeper insight into the issues raised above, a qualitative design, using interviews was found appropriate for the study. This helps to achieve the depth rather than the breadth of the study.

The empirical part was conducted with three private universities, conveniently selected in Ghana, namely Methodist University College, Ghana Telecom University College, and Regent University College. Therefore, the research approach chosen for the paper was predominantly qualitative to explore in as much detail as possible and aim to achieve the 'depth' rather than 'breadth' of a study.

The Public relations managers and staff and the registrars who were the administrators of the universities were interviewed in the premises of the universities. The interviews, usually conducted with the aid of an interview guide, helped to focus the discussions. In the words of Denscombe (2007) through interviews, a research could be limited to fewer informants with rich information sharing and also constitutes a learning process. The interviews were mostly conversational and loosely structured (Rubin and Rubin, 2005) and lasted for between 45 minutes to 1 hour and was recorded, with participants' permission and later transcribed.

Data analysis method proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994) was employed to analyze the data gathered for the study. Both within-case and cross-case analysis were conducted as suggested by Eisenhardt (1989). Within-case analysis was achieved through a detailed write-up of each case normally within twenty-four hours after the personal interview. As such, the researchers became personally familiar with each case as a stand-alone entity. The detailed knowledge of each case facilitated cross-case comparisons in order to determine the differences and similarities of public relations practices among the three universities.

## **RESULTS OF THE STUDY (Findings)**

### ***Public Relations Practices***

All the interviewees from the three universities conceded that public relations managers occupy a management position in the institutions. At Methodist University College, the Public Relations manager/Officer reports directly to the business development manager while those at Regent University College and Ghana Telecom University College report directly to the Presidents (CEO) of the University. This practice by Regent University College and Ghana Telecom University College goes to support a study by Jefkins (2000) who observed that, an ideal structure of public relations department is independent and directly responsible to the Chief Executive Officer. However, the practice at Methodist University College is not consistent with the findings of Gruniget *al.*, (2006).

At the three universities, all respondents expressly stated that the public relations unit works jointly with other departments and form part of the administrative unit of the university. The unit therefore, plays a pivotal role in the day to day activities and has cordial relationship with the management based on the common understanding that they are building a positive image of the university as put forth by Newsom, Turk and Kruckeberg, (2004).

The PR managers in all the three universities also revealed that they participate in management decision making which is consistent with views from the extant literature (Peyronel and Ławniczak, 2000). As a consequence, the public relations manager is believed to be given a seat on management advisory committee meetings and involved in decision making. However, we found that the public relations managers of the three universities are not represented on Council, which is the highest decision-making body of the Universities. This is not consistent with modern views of corporate management which hold that reserving a seat for public relations managers at the corporate boardroom and involving them in strategy development is a logical first step for corporate reputation building (Nakra, 2000).

Interviewees from the three universities contended that public relations is very important information source within and outside the universities and help to build relationship with the universities' publics. They further stressed that the unit acts as an active force for corporate image building of the universities and without an effective and vibrant public relations unit, building relationships and managing misconceptions about the private universities will be difficult. This is in agreement with Jobber's (2001) assertion that public relations' officer manages misconception for unfounded opinions not to tarnish the image or operations of the organization. Similarly, Well et al (2005) on the other hand, asserted that public relations objectives is to make changes in the public's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours related to a company, brand, or organization.

### ***Tools used by Public Relations***

We found from the interviews that public relations managers utilize both internal and external tools to communicate with their publics. Internally, notice boards; emails, memos and the website are the internal tools utilized while the print media, television, radio, billboards, brochures, flyers and folders, speeches, website, exhibitions and press releases are external tools utilized by the public relations units of the universities. The observation brought to the fore the argument in the literature that there are three types of public relations tools, - controlled, uncontrolled and semi-controlled (Well *et al.*, 2005). Thus, public relations units of the three universities are utilizing most of the tools provided in the literature for communicating with both internal and external publics (Belch and Belch, 2001; Lancaster, 2005).

It also emerged that the websites are the major channels for communicating with both the external and internal publics of the universities. This channel is useful to inform, educate and

build relationships with both internal and external publics and acts as a tool for reputation building for the universities. Through the websites, they are able to display information on courses of studies, admission requirements, announcements, and highlight major events in the university. The sites are designed and managed by qualified staff and are periodically updated. The findings are consistent with the views in the literature (Wright and Hinson, 2010; Clow and Baack, 2007; Well *et al.*, 2005) about the critical role of websites in today's corporate management. Thus, the public relations units view the website as a source of the universities' information for relationship building.

### ***Challenges faced by the public relations units***

We also explored the major challenges faced by the public relations units of the three universities.

The respondents in the three universities conceded that finance is a major obstacle hindering effective implementation of their plans. As private universities, the top management is more focused on infrastructure and facilities development, staff emoluments and general administrative overheads. Little budget is left for "non-essential" activities such as public relations. This resonates with the view in the literature that public relations still captures a small portion of the overall marketing budgets of most firms (Kotler *et al.*, 2005). This reinforces the interviewees' idea that the unit is facing financial constraints.

In the literature, there is evidence that setting specific objectives that are capable of evaluation and integrating the public relations function into the organization requires the right personnel to carry out the public relations functions (Jobber, 2001).

As a result of the critical role played by qualified personnel in developing and implementing organizational strategic plans, we also explored the role whether public relations units have qualified personnel. The three universities all concluded that staffing with the right personnel is a major hindrance. This is not surprising as the country as a whole lacks effective training institutions for public relations personnel especially at the top management level. In addition, there is evidence in the literature that higher educational institutions need to develop public relations capacities (Heskov and Pirožek, 2003).

Finally, we also found out whether the unit is recognized within the university set up and whether sufficient office space has been allocated to it. The greatest importance is attached to the public relations role in academia, but a relatively reduced role in commercial organizations (Kotler and Mindak, 2000). The respondents at both Regent University College and Ghana Telecom University College explained that the units have been assigned big and spacious office spaces. However in Methodist University College, the unit is placed under the Business Development Manager due to lack of office space. But this is understood in terms of the lack of



adequate office space facing the university as a whole. What is the linkage between public relations and business development? We found this strange because the literature argues that public relations offices should not be placed at the marketing, advertising or sales promotion department, in order not to limit the functions of the unit (Jefkins, 2000).

### Cross case analysis

In this part of the analysis, the three cases of Methodist University College Ghana, Regent University College and Ghana Telecom University College were compared with each other for similarities and differences of public relations practices, and the challenges they faced. Table 1 presents a summary of the main snapshots.

**Table 1: Public Relations Roles/ Tools/challenges**

<b>PUBLIC RELATIONS ROLES/ PRACTICES</b>	<b>Methodist University College Ghana</b>	<b>Regent University College</b>	<b>Ghana Telecom University College</b>
<b>Position of Public Relations Officer</b>			
<i>Management position</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>YES</i>
<i>Reports directly to CEO</i>	<i>NO</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>YES</i>
<i>Reports to divisional head</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>NO</i>	<i>NO</i>
<i>Cooperation with other departments</i>	<i>Cordial</i>	<i>Cordial</i>	<i>Cordial</i>
<i>Participate in management decision making</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>NO</i>
<i>Represented on council meetings</i>	<i>NO</i>	<i>NO</i>	<i>NO</i>
<i>PR is seen as important in the university</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>YES</i>
<i>Internal tools to communicate with publics</i>	<i>Notice Board, Emails, Memos, Website</i>	<i>Notice Board, Emails, Memos, Website</i>	<i>Notice Board, Emails, Memos, Website</i>
<i>External tools to communicate with publics</i>	<i>Print media, television, radio, billboards, brochures, speeches, websites, exhibitions, press releases</i>	<i>Print media, television, radio, billboards, brochures, speeches, websites, exhibitions, press releases</i>	<i>Print media, television, radio, billboards, brochures, speeches, websites, exhibitions, press releases</i>

Challenges:			
<i>Inadequate Budget</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>YES</i>
<i>Lack of Qualified Personnel</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>YES</i>
<i>Operational Space</i>	<i>NO</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>YES</i>
<i>Recognition</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>NO</i>

All the three private universities seem to have similar views on the issues raised in the issues of public relations in the universities. All the three universities' public relations managers are occupying management positions. It could also be seen that whilst PR Managers at Regent University College and Ghana Telecom University College report to the Chief Executive Officer of the university, public relations officer at Methodist University College Ghana reports to Head of a Division.

Additionally, none of the public relations managers is given a seat at council meetings which is the highest decision making body in the university. All the public relations managers have similar views on what should be the public relations functions within the universities.

Moreover, the common tool used for both internal and external communication is the university's website. It is also clear that both Methodist University and Regent University do not widely employ press conferences in their public relations activities. Ghana Telecom University does not widely use television and exhibition in public relations activities. It is apparent from the above that all the three private universities utilized most of the tools available but differences could be found in how each university attached importance to the tools.

From the cross case analysis of table 1, it could be observed that the three universities are similar in financial challenges facing the public relations units. The point where the universities differ is office space, recognition and appreciation of the public relations activities. While public relations unit is occupying a very big office with enough space at Regent University College and Ghana Telecom University College, Methodist University College doesn't have enough operational space for public relations activities.

### **MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

From the study, it could be concluded that even though public relations practices are recognized in the universities, they still face key challenges. Thus, the study carries a lot of managerial implications for private universities in Ghana.

1. The study revealed that private universities lack the resources to keep the unit operational and functional. Therefore, the private universities need to develop public relations capacities (Heskov

and Pirožek, 2003). PR unit in private universities should be given the needed resources to perform effectively and efficiently and build a proactive public relations department.

2. The universities have not accorded the PR unit the recognition they deserve. As they are not represented on the highest decision making bodies, “Council”, they may not be able to communicate timely information to the publics. The lack of recognition also manifests itself in lack of resources to keep the unit operational and functional. It must be echoed that public relations is a tool that creates an environment where every member of the university acts as both a client and a shareholder to help build relationship with the general public to debunk the negative perception. It is important therefore for PR units in private universities to be given representation on the highest decision making body of the Universities-Council to help in communicating timely information to its publics.

3. The result of the study also indicates that press conferences, television and exhibitions are public relations tools not widely used by the PR units of the universities in contrast to what has been put forth in the literature (Palmer, 2000; Lancaster 2005).

Press conferences, television and exhibitions as mediums of communication stand the chance of achieving a high level of impact on customers or publics by offering an opportunity for a two-way dialogue to gather technical information and offer the necessary explanations that can inspire confidence and trust and erase any erroneous impressions about the universities.

4. The universities should take advantage of the numerous opportunities that the internet provides to keep in constant touch with its publics especially the students as evidence from the study shows that this medium is under-utilized. Utilizing fully the website will help provide a faster and broader reach for PR activities. It will be useful in publishing the university’s press releases, background information, introducing new courses and providing general information to students and the public.

#### **DIRECTION FOR FUTURE STUDY**

The study has some major limitations. In the first place, it was carried out in only three private universities within the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. The views of other private universities across the country and even in other nearby countries have not been captured. Future studies must extend the study to other private universities in Ghana as well as the sub-region so that the findings could be generalized. Similarly, the study ignored the public relations practices in the public universities. Since the public universities offer similar services, future studies must investigate the practice of public relations in public universities to give a better representation so that a comprehensive understanding of public relations in higher educational institutions could be known. Moreover, since the private universities have not done much with regard to the role that public relations should play in the functioning of the universities, it is recommended that a further study should be conducted into other strategies which the universities are putting in place

to correct the wrong impression about the role and mission of private universities in nation building. In addition, future researchers interested in this area should also look at how the public relations unit is currently funded by the private universities in Ghana.

## CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the study was to gain an insight into public relations practices and its associated challenges in private universities in Ghana. The study revealed that public relations managers occupy management positions in the universities and play major roles in disseminating information to the publics in order to create a good image and good will for the universities. The Public relations departments play major roles in shaping public opinions about the universities (Peyronel and Ławniczak, 2000). However, the study further shows that they were not represented at the council which is the highest decision-making body in the universities to enable them disseminate management's decisions to the university's publics.

The study also revealed that public relations units of the universities utilize the university's websites as the tool in communicating with both internal and external publics. This supports a study conducted by Wright and Hinson (2010). Additionally, the study also established that the public relations units of private universities are not adequately resourced in terms of logistics, finance and personnel to perform effectively.

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