

# Assessment of the Application of Selected Public Relations Reputation Management Strategies as Weapons Against Corruption in Nigeria

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## Abstract

In this study, we undertook a critical appraisal of some selected public relations reputation management strategies like self-image auditing and corporate-auditing as weapons against corruption in Nigeria. This is motivated by the widely held international perception of Nigeria(ns) as very corrupt people and the negative image this is giving the citizens. The study objectives therefore included: ascertaining if a holistic self-image audit by Nigerians; corporate image audit by private/public organizations in Nigeria and a rebranding effort by all, could help in the eradication of corruption in the country. For the methodology, structured questionnaire and interviews were used in gathering data, which were analyzed in percentage frequencies. The results reveal that self-image audit, corporate and institutional image audit, matched by marketing communications rebranding campaign will help to stem the tide of corruption and redeem the soiled international image of the country.

**Keywords:** Public Relations, Reputation Management, Corruption, Image Audit.

## 1. Introduction

Corruption is viewed by many, locally and internationally, as the major cause of underdevelopment, social crises and infrastructural decays in Nigeria. Among the issues giving Nigeria and Nigerians negative international image corruption ranks as the first. Towards the close of 2009, the global anti corruption agency, Transparency International, ranked Nigeria among the 10th most corrupt country in the world. The organization defined corruption as "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain."

In spite of the fact that Nigeria is among the 140 signatories to the United Nation's 2006 treaty on corruption, this ugly cankerworm still thrives in its national life. From the Transparency International's definition of corruption, it is clear that the problem does not mean only financial embezzlement, but any abuse of office like electioneering frauds. It also includes acts considered abhorable by citizens of other nations like internet scams, advance-fee-frauds, credit card scams, etc, (Ajayi; 2008:11, Oti, Odigbo & Bassey, 2016). This could be why AllAfrica (2010) laments that "without any doubt, prostitution abroad has badly soiled Nigeria's international image." Akunyili (2009) also bemoaned that the Nigerian film industry, called Nollywood, has contributed to the nation's poor international image by projecting only negativities in society.

In order to redeem its battered international image, several administrations in Nigeria had embarked on one image-cleansing project or the other. These included the Dora Akunyili championed rebranding initiative with the slogan: "Nigeria: Good People, Great Nation," and the 'Heart of Africa project,' all of which failed. Some criticized the branding campaign headed by Dora Akunyili, pointing out that it was more of a media-bltz than a behavior-change campaign.

For instance, Fasehun (2010:19) argues that "a nation lacking in modern infrastructure, purposeful leadership and a culture of free and fair elections, should not waste funds in re-branding." But Akunyili (2009) had addressed the criticisms by saying, "Nigeria cannot wait until it solves all its problems before repairing its image," because the country's development is tied to her image. On the other hand, Jonathan (2009) also defended the project that it is a genuine way to re-orientate Nigeria and Nigerians toward believing in themselves again, and to change the perception of the country both locally and internationally.

However, Fasehun (2010) queried that it is not possible for over 150 million Nigerians who live under \$1 a day to believe in themselves. That it would be hard for anyone to believe in themselves, if you have to live under \$1 a day and if there is no hope for them. It is based on these criticisms of the rebranding project that some public relations experts like Odigbo (2007) and Nkwocha (2016) argue that a change of attitude by all Nigerians and the application of time-tested reputation management strategies like self image auditing on the part of all Nigerians, home and abroad, and corporate image auditing by Nigerian private and public organizations would serve as a potent weapon against corruption and thus help redeem the nation's sagging international image,

because public relations does not carve on rotten woods (Epele, 1978).

What is the veracity or otherwise of these claims? Finding answers to the poser is the main thrust of this study.

## 2. Statement of the Problems

Among the issues smearing the good image of Nigeria, the highest is corruption. Just towards the close of year 2009, the country's corruption index rating by the Transparency International nosedived from an already sad 121<sup>st</sup> position in the world in 2008 to a stinkier 130<sup>th</sup> position. Well meaning citizens of the country have been searching their minds for how best to arrest that hydra headed monster called corruption, which had been the bane of the nation's international image. Even today, the country's march at democratic politics looks murky, as electoral frauds have been the order of the day.

The several previous image-rebranding campaigns of the federal government have not helped much in redressing Nigeria and Nigerians soiled image abroad. Sadly enough, every positive move in that direction, seemed to be utterly diluted by damaging news of ugly acts of monumental corruption by citizens of the country. This, public relations experts say, calls for serious reputation management strategy anchored on: self-image auditing by all Nigerians, self-rebranding by all Nigerians, corporate image auditing and rebranding by the nation.

How workable these selected public relations reputation management strategies could be in solving the problems of negative image brought about by corruption in Nigeria is the major focus of this study.

## 3. Study Objectives

The specific objectives of the study include:

- i. To ascertain the extent holistic public relations self-image auditing by Nigerians, home and abroad, could assist in redeeming the corruption-imposed negative image.
- ii. To determine the extent corporate-image auditing by all public and private organizations in Nigerian could redeem the corruption-imposed negative image.

## 4. Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- i. To what extent will holistic public relations self-image auditing by Nigerians, home and abroad, assist in redeeming the corruption-imposed negative image of the country and its citizens.
- ii. Will corporate-image auditing by all public and private organizations in Nigerian significantly redeem the corruption-imposed negative image of the country and its citizens.

## 5. Review of Related Literature

### 5.1 Image Audit Concept

Ricardo (2009:3) says image audit is the research tool to study the 'hidden perceptions' of your target publics or stakeholders, in a scientific way. He catalogues the benefits of image audit as follows:

- Helps to understand the hidden perceptions of the employees, customers and other stakeholders very clearly
- Helps to formulate the communication strategies to improve the relationship and trust.
- Helps to maintain a good 'image' internally and externally
- Helps to rectify any misconceptions without delay.

### 5.2 Corporate Image Concept

Corporate image is a strategic asset that creates competitive advantage and favourable climate for the survival and development of an organization. For escaping negative consequences of uncontrolled image and shooting up opportunities of positive image, systematic measuring of corporate image is necessary, Smaizien and Orzekauskas (2006:1) advised.

Corporate image is an important organizational resource that enables to create, strengthen and sustain competitive advantage, avoid consequences of spontaneously emerged uncontrolled image, and maximize opportunities of positive image, it is necessary to measure and evaluate organizational image periodically. Corporate image audit is therefore used for measuring and evaluating corporate reputation Smaizien and Orzekauskas (2006:1) added.

### 5.3 Who Needs An Image Audit?

According to Ricardo (2009), periodic image-audit is needed by the following groups:

- Corporate organizations in private and public sector.
- Financial institutions like Banks and Insurance companies.

- Government Departments.
- Organizations offering customer service or products.
- Political parties.
- Educational Institutions.
- Trade Unions.
- Non-Governmental organizations.
- All others who care for public image.

#### 5.4 Image and Reputation Management

White (2003:1) tells us that integrity and reputation are the only real assets held by individuals, firms and governments. When one is lost, everything else follows. Character and attitude is the ultimate reputation builders, doing what you are committed to. Establishing a good reputation entails making and keeping good deeds and good behavior at all times.

Leake (2008:1-29) defines reputation management as the process of tracking an entity's actions and other entities' opinions about those actions, reporting on those actions and opinions, and reacting to that report creating a feedback loop. Reputation is generally wrapped around character; what an individual, organization, society or state is known for, and it may be good, bad or ugly.

Reputation management goes deeper than rhetoric – it requires action and engagement with different stakeholders. It has technicalities that are not present in traditional marketing communications. The company with the best reputation always achieves a substantially higher return on investment (White, 2003).

#### 6. Methodology

The study used survey design in sourcing for data. The area of study was three of the leading corporate and political centres of Nigeria (Lagos, Abuja and Kano) respectively. The justification for the choice is because in these three cities also reside people from all ethnic backgrounds of the country. The sample frame included high level public officers, civil servants, states and federal legislators and managers of private corporate organizations in the country. A sample size of 245 was arrived at through Freund and Williams statistical techniques.

#### 7. Data Presentation and Analysis

**Table 1: A test of self-image auditing as an antidote to corruption in Nigeria**

Choices	Frequency	Percentage
Agreed	165	67.35%
Don't Agree	50	20.41%
Not sure	30	12.24%
<b>Total</b>	<b>245</b>	<b>100%</b>

From data displayed on table 1, it is clear that 165 respondents, representing 67.35% agreed that self-image auditing by Nigerians would significantly help in stemming corruption in the country. 50 respondents, representing 20.41% disagreed with this. While 30 respondents, representing 12.24% chose to reserve their comments.

**Table 2: Assessment of self-rebranding By Nigerians as a weapon against corruption in the country**

Choices	Frequency	Percentage
Acceptable	182	74.29 %
Not Acceptable	50	20.41%
Not Certain	13	5.31%
<b>Total</b>	<b>245</b>	<b>100%</b>

182 respondents making 74.29% accepted this as a fact. 50 respondents representing 20.41% maintained it wouldn't serve much purpose. While 13 respondents making 5.31% declined to comment.

**Table 3: Assessment of the effects of ethical corporate/institutional Auditing on corruption by private Organizations in Nigeria**

Choices	Frequency	Percentage
Positive Effect	191	77.96 %
Negative Effect	4	1.63%
No Effect At All	20	8.16%
Not Certain	30	12.25%
<b>Total</b>	<b>245</b>	<b>100%</b>

191 respondents making 77.96% believe that ethical corporate auditing by public and private organizations

in Nigeria will go a long way in helping curb corruption in the system. But 4 respondents or 1.63% say it might have negative effect. 20 respondents or 8.16% doubts if it could have any effect at all. While 12.25% didn't want to bother their brains on this.

**Table 4: A Test of the Impact of Corporate Rebranding by Private/Public Organizations in curtailing the level of corruption in the country**

Choices	Frequency	Percentage
Positive Impact	188	76.73%
Negative Impact	5	2.04%
No Impact At All	21	8.57%
Not Sure	31	12.65%
<b>Total</b>	<b>245</b>	<b>100%</b>

## 8. Results

A summary of the results of our findings are as follows:

- (i) A greater percentage of Nigerians believe that there is need for self-image auditing by all citizens of the country, home and abroad, as an antidote to negative international image.
- (ii) Majority of the people also accept that a holistic self-rebranding effort by all Nigerians, home and abroad, will go a long way in cleansing the soiled image of corruption being hoisted on the nation and its nationals.
- (iii) At the public and private organizational levels, 77.96% of Nigerians believe that ethical corporate auditing is seriously needed to arrest corruption and restore citizens' good names.
- (iv) Finally, 76.73% of people also share the belief that ethical corporate rebranding is needed in Nigeria to stem corporate/institutional corruption in the country.

## 9. Discussion

The world we are living in today has become so dangerous that people no longer trust each other. Acts of violence, terrorism, kidnapping, assault, rape, frauds, corruption are in the news everyday. All these, have damaging effects on the individual and corporate reputations of Nigerians. People have lost lifetime opportunities due to soiled reputations or acts considered obnoxious by the global community.

For most developing countries like Nigerian official corruption and leadership lacking in selfless services has been one of the major problems smearing the nation's image internationally. Nigerian citizens are singled out for victimization all over the world, because of this problem and more. However, as our number one findings revealed, if the public relations reputation managed strategy of self-image auditing is adopted by all citizens of the country, the international community would warm up gingerly to Nigerians again as was the case in the 1970s and 1980s, the early days of the country's oil boom, when corruption at leadership levels was still running low.

The current rebranding campaign of the Nigerian government, is again something majority of Nigerians have accepted, as revealed by our number two result. But for it to work, every living Nigerian, home and abroad, must be made to buy into it and fully readjust their attitudes in line with a true rebranding spirit. However, stories hitting local and international news media show that the drive to amass illegal wealth still overwhelms the drive to rebrand.

A greater percentage of official corruption in Nigeria pass through the conduit of public and private organizations, agencies, parastatals and institutions. This supports the result of our number three findings that ethical corporate auditing should be incorporated into the rebranding project of the federal government as a statutory requirement for arresting corruption.

## 10. Recommendations

Based on the findings and other revelations of this study, the following recommendations are proffered:

- (i) The Federal Government of Nigeria should increase the gospel of rebranding in the media, to get every citizen of the country to embrace it and willingly adopt a self-image auditing and rebranding exercise.
- (ii) Nigerians living abroad should be enlightened to desist from all acts that tarnish the image of the country, like drug trafficking, female trafficking, money laundering, internet scam, credit card scam, terrorism, and the rest.
- (iii) The rebranding Nigeria exercise must incorporate messages to the leaders of the country to desist from embezzling public funds and siphoning such away to foreign banks, as this is one major area giving the country its corruption images.
- (iv) A great sanction should be meted to those in charge of finances at corporate organizations and institutions in Nigeria, especially government agencies, that serve as conduit for the siphoning of public funds.

- (v) The electoral reform program must be taken seriously and everything possible done to checkmate electoral frauds as a major factor casting negative image on the country.
- (vi) Self-image auditing and rebranding, together with corporate-image auditing and rebranding should be made a compulsory public relations reputation management state policy against corruption in the country.

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