

Enhancing Corporate Reputation Through A Deconstruction of Issues and Crises Roles.

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Abstract:

Overtime, the issues associated with corporate reputation have thrown several challenges at scholars who try to decipher what should and should not be an ideal reputation. With literatures suggesting that different publics have different perceptions of an organization whether the origin, length of planning circle, quantum and scale of branding engaged by such organizations matter or not (Hatch and Schultz, 2008) and the fact that the individual specific circumstances of message reception interact with the changing behaviour and activities of an organization, (L'etang and Pieczka, 2006); this paper adopted a critical analysis approach to identify issues in image and reputation building, situate the issues in the context of corporate values; and, appraised how such issues associated with the roles played during crises can help in enhancing corporate reputation.

Keywords: Corporate reputation, corporate issues, Crises, Crises Roles, Deconstruction

1.0 Introduction and Literature Review

Although public relations has been conceived to involve responsibilities which encourage the well-being and relationships of people, marketing communications and other bridge processes at the heart of different organizations, it has plummeted, recently to include emerging, strategic and creative discipline driven by the frames of newer communications (Gordon, 2011, p.5), all in a bid to help the process decision making and reputation management. Every corporate entity has its reputation to worry about, hence, it has been argued that the scheme of corporate reputation embraces both tangible and intangible perceptions from the inner and wider publics of an organization about its goods, products and services. Excellent reputation is equally argued to be a prime requirement for successfully branding the organization (Aaker et. al. 2004; Capozzi, 2005).

The inertia behind the forgoing is enhanced by earlier challenges that public relations as a profession went through where it was supposedly misconstrued as several other practices. These practices meant that several models would evolve to help grant it a passage towards excellent reputation. Organizations today find themselves sandwiched in this maze. The point to note as emphasized by Gunning (2007, p.243) position is that images are mental, but formed, at least in part by physical elements of the institution or organization. And this, gives credence to Baines et. al. (2004) categorization of the different forms of image as well as their relationship with one another.. Generically, the following five image points are identified.

The *mirror image* which is how internal management think or perceived outsiders see the organization; the *Current image* which is the one held by outsiders based on a consensus of perception modelled by their knowledge and experience as displayed by the organisation over time and the *Multiple image* which exemplifies a situation where different people see different images dependent on their particular relationship with the organization over time. The others are the *Wish image* that connotes the image that the organisation might want to aspire to or what they wish to attend to; and ultimately the less *perfect image* that an organization might seek to attain in the absence of the aspired one regarded as the Optimum image.

Consequent on the above, attempt to build a fostering corporate image is mitigated and acted upon by what Egan (2007, p.254) sees as the twin pronged reasons for poor image – issues arising from industrial relations, best practices, staff welfare to isolated crisis points. Hence all attempts to deal with an organization's image would be precipitated on dealing with the root cause for such negative publicity thus suggesting that they readily serve as the base for enhancing corporate image and reputation. All these swerve within the framework of public relations. For instance, no amount of public relations justification could resolve the exposure of Nike's use of overseas 'sweat-shops' which seriously affected its corporate image until they changed their manufacturing policy. In a nutshell, misunderstanding can be resolved through deconstructing such issues and crisis roles through adequate communicating and implementing same. For an organization to redeem its image effectively the disparity between how a company would like to see itself (wish image) and how management might regard it (mirror image) and contrast this with how its publics see it (current image) has to do that through a communication audit. Public relations help all these processes.

Defining public relations as a communication function of management through which organizations adapt, maintain, and enhance organizational goals to relationship management (Trench and Yeoman, 2009) and looking after reputation (CIPR, 2010), scholars are unanimous in asserting the fact the current trend is about relationship management which can only suffice when issues are properly canvassed and crisis mitigated. Not done too, some had maintained that marketing as a management process would better the reputation building process because of the wider social and environmental issues in both long and short terms. Marketing is the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirement profitably (Chartered Institute of Marketing, 2010) while marrying it to the succinct role of communicating organizational activities to elicit favourable response hedges on the activities of marketing communications and when focus is on the corporate image, then the concept becomes corporate communications.

Chun (2005) argues that despite the general view which links reputation to profitability, the performance has not been empirically studied as few or no studies exist to indicate little association between reputation and brand equity, even though (Page and Fearn, 2005) maintained that a bad reputation makes the attainment of brand equity difficult, the good reputation on the other hand does not guarantee strong brands. This brings to the fore the 3Ps of people, planet and profiteering in public relations practice.

An organization's hesitation in any aspects of these triple bottom line (3) Ps, signals an indication of a risk that will snowball into an occurring issue or crisis that can damage the reputation of an organization and possible affects its overall success or even its continue existence (Gordon, 2011, p.279). Stakeholder's demands ethical trustworthy behaviour from organizations as it is essential that organisations take the responsibility for an

issue or crisis and take the lead on it. Conflicts related to an organisation take many forms that fall under the purview of public relations which also means that the practitioner must engage in communication strategies and processes so as to influence the event to the benefit of both the organisation and its publics. So, how do these twins of issue and crisis management convalesce?

Issue management provides the public relations practitioners the responsibility of testing his preparedness and prompt response to check and coil or prevent the issues through the building of durable relationships between stakeholders so as to attain set benefits. Gregory (2006, p.144) sees an issue “as being present when the reputation, capital, or marketing relations (trading) of an organization is damage or interrupted”. Thus Gregory’s view pinned the practicability of an issue to negatively impacting on corporate reputation within and outside the organisation. When an issue is evident, then it requires an issue management process to deal with the potential impact.

As part of strategic planning for an organisation that requires monitoring and analysis to ensure not only influencing target audience (publics) but also changing set own practices as a glaring need to be responsive to the interest of their customers and consumers, Regester and Larkin (2005, p.42) equally see it as looking into the future to recognize probable trend or events which may influence the way an organisation is to function but which at present may have little real spotlight, probably with no sense of necessity and an unclear time reference.

However, the impact of an issue in general varies with different publics, this conceive the need by stakeholders analysis to be carried out in order to view how the niche target audience is affected and also how the issue is being interpreted within the frame of social and cultural factors influencing behaviour (Dade, 2009).

Crisis always means coping with unfriendly public relations hence it cannot be alluded to be good. The word crisis seems borderless when it comes to defining it. Griffin (2008, p.80) sees crisis as “something that happens suddenly and is a severe threat to the organisation reputation which may lead to extreme enquiry and puts the organization in the spotlight for all the wrong reasons”. This approach centres on the reputation of an organisation which the crisis put at risk. From a broad perspective Fearn-Bank (2008, p.480) view crisis as “a major occurrence or event with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organisation including its publics, products, services or its good name”. Fearn-Banks (2001) no doubt went beyond the reputation of the organisation to include the stakeholders of the organisation to be at risk as well. For example, in the late 2009 Tiger Woods, who is estimated to earn about \$100 (one hundred) million dollars a year in endorsement, confessed to marital unfaithfulness. The company’s which had sponsored Tiger Wood also confessed dropped in value, which also indicate that the crisis did not only affect Tiger Wood’s reputation alone but also affect the organisation and their investor (Eurosports, 2009)

Framing crisis will see 14% of it coming up suddenly and 86% of it well aware of but with no defining plans to mitigate it; the attention to the snake metaphor where the analogy of the cobra and the python specie of snakes was used to describe the attack pattern to the crisis issue (Tench and Yeomans, 2009, p.386).

Crisis Management as different from the word ‘crisis’, according to Fearn-Bank (2001, p.480) is “a strategic planning to prevent and respond to a negative event, it’s a process that removes some of the threat, understanding, and allows the organization to be in good control of the situation or its destiny”. The definition indicates that Crisis management is not an everyday affair, but preparedness and harnessing its gains positively

should be regularly the agenda of the organisation. Baines et al. (2004, p.327) contend that active preparedness should be on top of the priority list, a kind of logical approach which engages the whole organisations in hard work to avoid crisis that may influence the company and manage those that do. Thus openness, information and communications during and after crisis event are crucial to its management.

The relation and the way a company communicates to the media are essential. Tench and Yeomans (2009, p.396) argue that communication during crisis is the most important choice to ensure effective management of any crisis. They prescribe a proposed 5cs model that a spokesperson should follow. The model is based on consultancy knowledge of top crisis managers and these include concern, clarity, control, confidence and competence. In terms of concern, the organization and its spokesperson needs to show sincere concern about the occurrence or problem over what has happened and most importantly concern for the people affected now and in the future. Concern is just a simple human passion but relief a lot of reaction. Clarity focusses on the need for the spokesperson of an organization in a crisis to give clear and consistent messages in honesty and sincerity as these are the important pillars in establishing, maintaining and promoting venerable reputation. Control ensures that the tone of communication, the situation, the venue and also the environment are within the grasp of the crisis managers so that the organizational spokesperson can appear not be arrogant but must get the messages across with great humour and confidence which is the purview of confidence. Competence reflects the organisation exhibition of capability to handle the crisis situation. This study thus sought to identify and deconstruct some of the organizational issues that impact on public and appraise how they can help the enhancing process of corporate reputation.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were:

- a. To identify issues in image and reputation building and public relations inputs.
- b. To understand what corporate image is all about and the challenges.
- c. Appraise how these twin issues when deconstructed can help the process of enhancing corporate reputation.

2.0 Theoretical Underpinning

Two theories that can be used in this study are *Apologia* and the *Image Restoration theories*. Hearit (2005) underscores the basis of the Apologia theory that “a corporate apologia is a response to acquisitions of ethical misconduct in which a company has its reputation and to which it offers discourse in self-defense that denies, explain or apologizes for its action” especially when issues and crisis arise. The theory does not align with the issue of public apology over an incident that has affected the fortunes of the company, although such actions might imply apologies, rather the apologia is a justification of certain actions presenting “a competing interpretation of the facts and, in so doing repairs an organization’s damaged reputation.

In the opinion of Benoit (2005) image restoration theory provides understanding of the communication options available for those - whether organizations or persons, who face threat to their reputation. A person’s image or reputation is extremely important. Accusations or suspicious of wrongdoing have a variety of adverse effects. Corporations can lose business, politicians can lose support and elections, people can lose friends and attract hostility, and at times legal or other sanctions can be applied. Because credibility is important to persuasion, threats to image can damage one’s ability to communicate effectively. People and organizations

have important reasons to maintain a favorable image.

In all of these the public relations person determines (i) what accusation(s) threaten the image and (ii) who is or are the most important audience(s). You cannot hope to successfully counteract an accusation unless you know the nature of the accusation. Vague rumours or whispers may arouse your concern, but you must know the problem to repair it. These signal the process of deconstructing the issues and crisis to help enhance corporate reputation.

3.0 Research Methodology

The study is qualitative. Public relations practitioners were isolated in separate organizations and their views, generated from interview schedule and ethnographic approaches were collated and analyzed against the thrust of literature and theoretical postulations underpinning the study using explanation building pattern to form deductions and recommendations. Ten (10) practitioners drawn purposively from ten select organizations constitute the sample for the study.

4.0 Discussions

a. Issues in image and reputation building and public relations inputs.

Responding to emerging issues and crisis has become an important function of public relation. Wilcox and Cameron (2010, p.248) argued that public relations practitioners must decide the position its organization will take towards its publics during a quarrel situation. The public relations practitioners should be able to identify and monitor threats, assess them, take a decision or a position with the organisation and then commit to communication effort from the position. In order to distinguish between issues and crisis and the activities of public relations practitioner, Gordon (2011, p.280) has identified the role of public relations person during issues or crisis that is facing an organization.

Table 4.1

Source: Gordon (2011, p.280)

The above table differentiate issues from crisis and also the role of public relations in dealing with each of them as they emerge which supports the position of the public relations practitioners.

b. Corporate image and its challenges.

The McDonald's challenge provided a guiding light in this regards. It was drawn from the technical challenges (issues) that had confronted McDonalds and how the company have been able to address the situation. With weighty and countless challenges over its offerings, the company did not shy away from the issues but rather employed the snake approach through the following defining approaches:
Introduction of staff website and online training for its employees

- ✓ BTEC qualification in "work skills" for its employees
- ✓ Reducing fat contents in fries
- ✓ Converting chip fat to bio fuel
- ✓ Providing Wi-Fi access

Practitioners were unanimous in their assertion that the larger and successful the organization, the more likely it will be susceptible to reputation challenges especially when the competition is as strong as the others. Their views amplified those identified as the roles of public relations to marketing of the organization, failure which they become daunting challenges. Public relations contributes to developing

new prospects for new markets, such as people who inquire after seeing or hearing a product release in the news media; provides third-party endorsement via newspapers, magazines, radio and television, through news releases about a company's products or services, community involvement, inventions and new plans; supports in generating sales lead, usually through articles in the trade press about new products and services as well as paved the way for sales calls. Others identified include the provision of inexpensive sales literature which can be reprinted as informative pieces for prospective customers; supporting in establishing the corporation as an authoritative source of information on a given product and helping in selling minor products that do not have large advertising budgets. Without any of these, the respondents enthused reputation would have suffered decisive affront. Just as the idea of organizations as network of stake holding communities gains credence in the business world, there is also a growing recognition that public relation, with its own particular skills in relationship building, has a role far beyond marketing communication (Rogers 2007). For example, the corporate branding debate in marketing circles recognises that organizations have many stake holders and that if a whole organization is to gain support then all stake holders not just customers will need to be addressed, (Balmer and Gray 2003; Gregory 2007). Public relations practitioners today understand the immense richness of audience that have an interest in the company or organization, public relation practitioners can develop these as they have the multiplicity of audiences and channels to use to reach them. In the views of Wilcox and Cameron (2010, p.22), the concept of integration is the measuring sophistication of an organisation to use a variety of strategies and tactics to convey a consistent in a variety of as many forms as possible. Arguably, there is a realization today on the part of much management and marketing executives that public relation is an effective strategy in several important areas as well.

c. Deconstructing issues and crisis in enhancing corporate reputation

This question is important to reaching the understanding and conclusion about the study. Issues and crisis exact a good deal of pressure upon any organisation that is going through it, because it submerge and expose the organisation to a great risk. Hayes (cited Egan 2007, p.258) observed that the best avenue to tarnish or destroy ones reputation is to be ill-prepared for all kinds of crisis and fall short to make a stand on the appropriate decision. Hayes also stress the fact that the effects of issues and crisis put an organisational reputation on the point of destruction most especially if the organization refuse to respond accordingly with the right measures. This direction of argument was reinforced by the respondents and well observed in most organizations under consideration. Tench and Yeomans (2009, p.390) explains the real cost of a crisis, that the most significant cost of all (crisis) to any organisation is market confidence and 'reputation' as such fully managing issues and crises by means of integrating them into the overall corporate portfolio of the organization is a sure way of enhancing reputation rather than allowing these issues to destroy the framework of the organization. Dealing with them in this guide demands some form of apologia and not propaganda. This is because building reputation is not only expensive but it can take years to realize. Egan (2007) also attest to an effect of crisis which pose a high degree of threat to corporate reputation or even to the continued existence of the organization as a whole. Issue is something that any meaningful organisation will not leave unattended to because it carries venom that is poisonous which can lead to the death of the organisation. Gregory (2002, p.144)

emphasizes that both issue and crisis are potentially harmful, as unmanaged issues become threats to corporate reputation, which is its most precious asset. Scholars have also identify that crisis is an acute risk to reputation which may take ages to put it back on the right platform but when well managed rather than destroy, becomes a re-enforcer. This view is in line with Tench and Yeomans (2009, p.390) when they assert that reputation building is not only expensive but it can take years to attain. Although, Seeger et al. (2001, p.156) argue from a different perspective, that issues, conflict, disruption or crisis are a crucial element of an organisation lifecycle and can also be viewed as a chance for development. Did the respondents agree on the contrary? Definitely not! The views as expressed by the scholars are equally as engaging as with the practitioners.

5.0 Implications and Findings

Findings revealed the following:

1. Hesitation in the domain of the triple bottom line (people, planet and profit) will ignite risk of an issues or crisis emerging which could become double barrelled. Although there marked difference between an issue and crisis, some correlation also exists. It is important to subsist that issues are not always negative because as Regester and Larking (2008, p.42) argue, that issues can identify new opportunity within the organization which can be harness to shape the company positively. The respondents concur that the main issue about issues is the seemingly lack of preparedness and the inability to make the right decision which naturally provide avenues to tarnish and destroy corporate reputation. Invariable it was established that public relations plays an essential role in resolving issues and crisis and provoke the *Jefkins Transfer Process* in establishing, building and maintaining relations between an organization and its publics.
2. The practitioners enthused that managing issues involves a systematic approach of predicting problems, anticipating threats, minimising surprises, deciding on issues and relatively preventing crisis as a means of enhancing reputation. A growing market confidence and reputation are the most importance managerial costs because reputation building is not only expensive but can take ages to be achieve and moments with only a tiny issue to destroy. Issues and crises have consequences such as management distraction, labour concern, political backlash, legal actions or reactions, customer and consumer reactions. But with effective communication which is the gamut of public relations, reinforcement can be made of both the public and corporate reputation.
3. Gruning (2007, p.243), argued that corporate image management is a very vital aspect of public relations. Because the task of public relations in all of this is to increase peoples knowledge and increase their experience of the company, the greater the understanding that a public relations practitioner can create the better are the chances of the public having a sort of real and correct image of the industry, company or organization and the way it attends to issues. Just as public image is vital to all organisations, this work has found out that public relation agencies offer important and timely transmission of information that helps save the image (face) of organizations. In clear terms “public relations help an establishment and its public acclimatize mutually to one another”. The assertion by Gunning (2007), indicates that public relations is an essential tool in building good corporate image because it aids in creating mutual understanding between the corporate institution and its publics through the increased knowledge and experience of the company.

4. The practitioners see public relations roles as a helper in building a stronger brand image, through getting the wider public understanding of the organization and its product or services by making the company achieve transparency. Public relations stories in the media are like third party testimonials people can easily believe what they read in the newspapers or news story than advertisement. In competitive marketing and low level of brand differentiation, there is need of practitioners or communicators with the right technical knowhow who can explain the goals and aspirations of audiences like individuals, organization and government to their publics in a socially acceptable and responsive manner. In the frames of PRSA practices and most applicable to practitioners in Nigeria, defining the role of public relations today amounts to providing a tone of voice in the marketplace of ideas, facts and viewpoints to help informed public debate. This indicates the background that public relations provide the clear bridge between organizations and its publics to further make clear about the activities of an institution towards achieving its goals and objective on one hand and on the other define the position of the publics to its organisation. Public relation in itself is a purpose of clarity.
5. To sum it up, despite the issues surrounding the practice of public relations today, this work revealed that public relations is indeed a service industry, it is used to achieve a number of important activities and the most valuable of these is that public relations is use to raise awareness, sensitise, inform publics to gain understanding, to build trust, to make friends, to give people reasons to relate with an organisation and finally to establish a platform of consumer acceptance. The most obvious strategic role is to create community affinity while at the same time complementing consumer affinity for the brand. PR is uniquely capable of building relationships with communities e.g. geographic, demographic, social, political, special interest, etc. through events, sampling, causes, and sponsorships, to name but a few, and that is essentially what it takes to create good marketing, and building reputable corporate image.

6.0 Conclusion

Public relations activities are both mitigated and inherently sacrosanct in roles definition, issues and crisis management. These activities which covert objectivity in approach, variety of skills, deploying of extensive resources, special problem solving skills, creativity and credibility confer sets of responsibilities that can affect an industry, institution, companies, firms and organizations in different ways hence the need to identify issues and crisis roles and transfer same to reputation enhancers. Dealing with issues is all about good assessment, impact analyses and scenario planning. A good crisis plan brings all those together speedily where the full commitment of all the stages is obligatory. Public Relations today act as very important buffer between an organisation and its publics, which is correctly explained by the concept of Relationship Management Theory and to sum it all effective communication is the most valuable key that will reinforce public opinion, build and maintain a responsible corporate reputation.

7.0 Recommendations

- Organizations that are concerne with stability, increase and expansion should prioritize the triple bottom line (people, planet before profit) approach in every sphere of its activities because ‘when people (organizations) believe that because nothing has gone wrong, nothing will go wrong, they court problems or disaster. There is noise in every system and every design. If this reality is mistreated, natures soon remind us of our folly’.

- Organizations should inject people oriented programmes and policies in driving its objectives so as not only to optimize its image but attain both forms of images it desired. In this light, it becomes proactive in minimizing and managing the effects of any sort of issues or sudden crisis as they emerge.
- Just as the activities of an organization have implication on its image, the way PR practitioners behave also has an implication on the profession at large. The PR practitioners should be very conscious of the ethics of the profession at all cost in trying to manage and enhance corporate reputation.

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Table 4.1

Issues PR	Crisis PR
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Addresses potential threat to the organization but which may also be a positive influence in leading to changes -Deals with on-going matters -Focuses on anticipating and planning , requires on-going research and monitoring -More time and space to consider a plan -Looks future to identify potential trends and events that may influence it -Publics considers issues as negative aspects of an organization -Plans in a developmental stage -Key teams developing clear guidelines and drawing on expert knowledge in the organization. -Language is clear and not emotional -Issues may never happened and can be prevented or it can become chronic issue with on-going consequence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Addresses existing disasters facing the organization -Deals with severe risks -More action-oriented -Reactive, deals with the situation after they have come to the knowledge of the publics -Situation must be dealt with immediately -Window of goodwill if it is an accident because a crisis may have the public on side if it is an accident -Clear focus with finite actions and publics -Needs a large active senior team with specialist expertise. -Emotive language is a pre-requisite -Crisis has happened and has an effect on the organizations development

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