
Public Relations Strategies and Image Management in Time of Organizational Conflict

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Abstract

This study sought to investigate the role of public relations in resolving conflict in Federal Medical Centre (FMC) Asaba. The objectives of this study were to examine the extent to which public relations programs have significant effect in resolving conflicts between FMC and her patients; the extent to which adequate information available to management significantly assist in resolving conflicts; and to ascertain whether public relations play a significant role in resolving conflicts in FMC. The study adopted the descriptive survey research design. The major instrument that was used in the data collection was questionnaire. The study population consists of senior and junior staff of FMC Asaba. Taro Yamani formula was used to determine a sample size of three hundred and fifty (350) respondents and the T-test and Chi-square non parametric statistic was used to test the hypotheses. The findings of the study revealed among others that public relations programs have significant effect in resolving conflicts between FMC Asaba and her patients ($t=12.312$, $p=0.0012$); adequate information available to management significantly assists in resolving conflicts in FMC ($t=2.692$, $p=0.004$) and; public relations play a significant role in resolving conflicts in FMC (chi with 4 degree of freedom 376.36, $p=0.000$). The study therefore concludes amongst others that the existence of distinct public relations unit with readily available qualified public relations personnel at the FMC Asaba be created to ensures effective public relations practices in the organization. Thus, management should ensure that the public relations team should be continually trained and retrained so as to be equipped with modern public relations knowledge and skills. This will ensure that they keep abreast with development in modern public relations practice.

Keywords: public relations, organizational conflict management, public relations strategies.

Introduction

Several factors impede effectiveness of public relations as a tool for image management during organization crisis especially in health institutions in Nigeria. Where there is no public relations unit, it will be difficult to successfully resolve conflict. It will, therefore, be difficult for the organization to correct the wrong impression and public opinion about the organization developed by the conflict.

Furthermore, inadequate information and insincerity of management staff have often lead to conflict in hospitals in the country. Where adequate information is not available, it will be difficult for everyone to be carried along in the process of resolving the conflict. This is often observable in Federal Medical Centre (FMC) Asaba. Also, lack of willingness and staff disposition to resolving the conflict will make it difficult for mutual understanding to be established in the process of managing the conflict. Against this background, therefore, this study examined public relations as a tool for image management in times of organizational conflict using FMC Asaba as reference point.

Although series of research have been conducted in conflict management by different scholars but these researches were centred on industries and civil service. For example Kaycee (1998); Amona (2000); Abdul (2002), Mayo (2013), etc, whose studies were centred on manufacturing organizations, Airline services, core civil service (ministries, departments, and Agencies) and hospitality management. Little or no emphasis have been made in using public relations as a tool for managing organizational image especially in the area of medical services in Nigeria. The main or broad objective of this study therefore is to examine the role of public relations as a tool for image management during an organizational conflict. Thus, the specific objectives of the study are;

1. To examine the effect of public relations programs in resolving conflicts between FMCAAsaba and her patients.
2. To determine if adequate information is available to the management of FMC Asaba in its efforts at resolving conflicts.
3. To appraise the role of public relations in resolving conflicts in FMCAAsaba

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested in this study;

Ho₁, Public relations programs do not have significant effect in resolving conflicts

between FMC Asaba and her patients

Ho₂, Adequate information available to management does not significantly assist in resolving conflicts in FMC Asaba?

Ho₃, Public relations do not play a significant role in resolving conflicts in FMCAAsaba?

The scope covers definitions, functions, strategies and techniques of public relations, as well as public relations in corporate image management using Federal Medical Centre Asaba as a focal point. On the significance, the study will be useful to the organization as it will enable their public relations managers to understand public relations strategies that should be adopted in establishing and sustaining mutual understanding between the organization and its internal and external publics. Third, public relations managers will find the information in this study useful with respect to how to use public relations in managing their organization's images during conflict, It will show them how to adopt a proactive approach in this respect.

This study experienced limitations in the area of uncooperative attitude of some FMC staff that refused to complete the questionnaire. This adversely affected primary data collected.

Review of Related Literature

In this section, the researchers documented the views of different scholars in public relations, image management and organizational conflict.

Concept of Public Relations

The term "public relations" has so many definitions as given by many scholars, researchers and communication experts. This is because it cuts across all disciplines and each person tries to define it from his own perspective.

Norman (2002), views public relations as that of establishing and maintaining mutual understanding between an organization and its publics for the purpose of communicating a company's views and objectives while at the same time correcting public reactions. This is further supported by Jefkins (2003) who defines public relations as consisting of all forms of planned communications between an organization and its publics for the purpose of achieving specific objectives.

Nwosu (2011), offers a number of definitions of public relations to include winning friends, keeping them and influencing them as well as others.

From all these definitions given above, one thing that is clear that public relations is about creating and maintaining goodwill and mutual understanding

between an organization and its publics.

Thus, it is a management function which helps to establish and maintain mutual lines of communication understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its publics. Besides, it involves the management of problems and issues which might be relevant to any sector (Ughaja, 2014).

Nwosu (2011), expresses that one major function of public relations is the management of all forms of corporate information and communications for any organization. This function includes all types of internal communications and external communications between an organization and its external publics. Internally, the public relations manager will handle regularly such functions as employee communications and organization communication including grapevine and other informal communication forms.

Ugbaja (2014) states that the external communication forms which the public relations strategy must handle include publicity and publicity campaigns which must be well planned and executed. This is very vital because in this age of information technology (IT), the corporate information and communication management has special functions and importance.

Public Relations Strategies

According to Chukwu (2015), the task of building good public relations can only be achieved with the use of appropriate tools. These are publicity, public relations advertising and special events. In this study only publicity and special events were discussed.

A. Publicity

Publicity is the tool of mass communication which can be defined as the generation of news about a person, product or service that appears in broadcast or print media (Doug and Hanson, 2003). Again, Nwokoye (2004), define publicity as information about an organization and its products that is conveyed to the public by the mass media because such information is news worthy.

Publicity is always given in the form of editorials, news release or news in print and electronic media. Unlike advertising, publicity is not paid for and has no identified sponsor. An organization must have good press relations or media relations in order to have good publicity. Accordingly, opportunities for publicity include the introduction of a new product, award ceremony, company sales and earnings, etc.

The different types of publicity include news release, service feature articles, product publicity, financial

publicity, photography and printed materials (Chukwu, 2004).

B. Special Events

The special events often adopted in public relations practice include;

1. **Courtesy Call:** The use of courtesy call is to create good rapport between an organization and its relevant publics. According to Ugbaja (2014), when such visit is made, the organization uses the support, cooperation and understanding of the organization.
2. **Talk Show/Media link:** This is usually an interactive session between representatives of the organization and the general public either on TV or radio. The objective is to win the sympathy understanding, goodwill and support of not only its publics but also the general public.
3. **Sponsorship:** According to Ukpaukure (2002), sponsorship is the provision of financial and material resources by a named organization for the promotion or execution of a program from which the public of the organization will desire some benefit. An organization can through sponsorship of events, scholarship; sports etc achieve some objectives which include publicity, marketing, entertainment and social responsibility.
4. **Facility visit:** According to Ugbaja (2014), an organization can organize facility visit for members of the public to its premises for the purpose of seeking their support, understanding and cooperation for a program. This technique is used to enhance the image of the organization.

Organizational Conflict

Conflict is conceived to be an outcome of behaviour which is an integral part of human life. Dunlop (2014), expresses that conflict is a disagreement between two or more individuals or groups with each individual or group trying to make the other accept its view or position. Ugbaja (2014), defines organizational conflict as any dispute, individual or group that arises in the work place which causes disharmony among a group of workers or between an individual and the management.

In analyzing conflict situation in corporate organizations, McDaniel (2016) explains that organizational conflicts arise because participants in

an organization differ in their attitudes, values, beliefs, goals and understanding. For this reason, conflict is unavoidable. This implies that it is the difference in the orientation, personalities and identities of individuals and groups within an organizational frame work that brings about organizational conflict.

Nwatu (2013), remarks that in all organizations, employees and employers have common in getting work done. What constitutes the work, how the work should be done, and the price of labour in the work process constitute areas where the interests of the two parties vary? It is therefore essential to put in place machinery for effective management of conflicts naturally resulting from their common and opposing interests.

Public Relations as a Tool for Managing Organizational Image during Organizational Conflict

Organizational conflict usually poses serious challenge to the public relations manager as he is more concerned with restoring the image of the Organization that has been smeared or damaged particularly in the case of external organizational conflict. The damage to the image or reputation of the organization can only be redressed through restoration of mutual understanding between the organization and its external publics. This is where public relations comes in (Ajala, 2015). As a tool for managing the organizations image during the conflict, public relations' strategies and techniques should be effectively adopted and applied by the public relations manager.

Ajala also state that the success or failure of public relations in being used as a tool for managing the image of the organization depends on how the public relations manager uses his skill, candor, knowledge and professionalism to manipulate public relations strategies and techniques. This calls for well-articulated public relations programs that will aim at restoring mutual understanding and respect between the organization and the relevant publics. Norman (2015) suggests that public relations manager should always adopt proactive public relations management approach. Such approach entails planning ahead, anticipating one conflict any moment, map out preventive measures and control strategies in case of its eventual occurrence. He should be more concern with restoring the image of the organization than the cost implication of such program. Thus, the key to

successful handling of damaged corporate image during organizational conflict is proactive public relations.

Gonzalez-Herrew and Pratt (1995) cited in Nwosu (2011) developed four phase model of corporate image management during organizational conflict, viz;

Phase I Model

1. Scan the environment for publications that affect the conflict.
2. Collect information on the issue and develop a communication strategy that will re-direct its cause.

Phase II Model

Set up policy on the issue.

1. Select members of the conflict management team
2. Identify the staff that will handle media relation.
3. Declare the message, target, the media outline that will be used in implementing the conflict communication plan
4. Assess the dimension of the conflict
5. Assess the degree of conflict the organization has over the situation.
6. Assess the options the organization can choose from in developing a specific conflict plan.

Phase III Model

During the conflict;

1. Evaluate the organization's response to the situation.
2. Pre-empt negative publics the actions being taken to resolve the conflict.
3. Direct the organization's message to the appropriate publics and implement the internal communication program.

Phase IV

In the post-conflict

1. Continue to pay attention to the organizations multiple publics.
2. Continue to address the issue until its intensity is reduces.
3. Continue to inform the media of your actions.
4. Evaluate how the conflict plan work and how management/staff respond to the situation.
5. Incorporate the feedback into the conflict plan, improve it and prevent future conflict.
6. Develop long-term communication strategy.

Oduma (2015) posits that the secret of effective corporate image management during organizational conflict is identifying target and relevant publics and giving right information at the right time. During the crisis, the organization and the public relations manager's reputations are at stake. So it is the responsibility of the public relations manager to manage both very well.

Summary

The place of public relations research in an organization cannot be over emphasized as it helps to bridge the communication gap between management and its relevant publics. Public relations practitioners can only make good decisions when they are provided with facts which are usually obtained through research. The public relations manager must plan and execute regular opinion, attitude, image and reputation, behavioral and other type of research for the organization in order to provide the information which will guide action.

Evaluation or evaluative research is carried out by the public relations manager at the end of each project, program or plan period to assess how well or badly the organization has performed and to use this as a guide for future decisions and actions.

Methodology

Descriptive survey research design was adopted for this study. This method was considered appropriate for the study as it enabled the researchers to make personal contact with elements of the study population from whom information were collected for the study. The survey research necessitated the administration of copies of questionnaire in collecting the primary data. Secondary data were generated from previous studies of scholars (textbooks and journals). The study was limited to

Federal Medical Centre (FMC), located at WestendAsaba. The study consist of senior, junior, casual and internship staff. As at the time of carrying out this research they were estimated to be 2,824 staff. The entire staff were categorized into senior and junior staff in the analysis.

In determining the sample size Taro Yamani formula was applied thus:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

where n = sample size
N = population
e = error margin
i = constant value

$$\text{Therefore} = \frac{2824}{1 + 2824(0.05)^2}$$

$$= \frac{2824}{1 + 7.06}$$

$$= \frac{2824}{8.06}$$

$$n = 350 \text{ approx.}$$

This sample was distributed to all category of staff in the hospital using simple random technique and 310(89%) was returned and used for analysis. The reliability of the instrument was established through a Crombach Alpha test on the questionnaire. A Crombach Alpha of 0.85 was observed which showed that the questions and the number of respondents were reliable for this study. In analyzing the data, t-text statistics and chi-square were used to test the stated hypotheses.

Test of Hypotheses and Discussion of Findings

Ho₁: Public relations programs do not have significant effect in resolving conflicts between FMC Asaba and her patients.

Table 1: Responses to Whether Public Relations Programs were used effectively to Manage the Organization's Image during Organizational Conflict with Patients

	Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
a.	Yes	298	96.1
b.	No	12	3.9
	Total	310	100

Source: Field Survey, 2018

Table 2: Analysis of t- test Result for hypothesis One

		Levene's Test for Quality of Variances		t-Test for Quality of Means						
		F	Sig	f	df	Sig.(2 tailed)	Mean Difference	STD Error Difference	95% Confidence interval of the Difference	
Senior and junior staff	Equal variances assumed	18.922	.0012	12.312	96	.086	.400000	.23178	-.09342	1.43357
	Equal variances not assumed			1.856	4	.129	.400000	.31905	.23357	1.43357

Source; Questionnaire Survey, 2018

A t-test is a test that shows the significance difference between sets of alternatives. Given a significance level of 0.05.that is at 95% level of significance and the p value = 0.00 < 0.05, equal variance was assumed. For a 2-tail test, the significance of 0.0012 < 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected while the alternate hypothesis accepted at 96 degree of freedom for senior and junior staff. The study therefore, found that

senior and junior staff agreed that public relation programs have significant effect in resolving conflicts between FMC Asaba and her patients. ($t = 12.312, p = 0.0012$).

H₀₂: Adequate information available to management does not significantly assist in resolving conflicts in FMC Asaba.

Table 3: Responses on Whether Adequate Information Available to Management helps in Resolving Conflicts

	Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
a.	Yes	251	81
b.	No	59	19
	Total	310	100

Source: Field Survey, 2018

Table 4: Analysis of t-test Result for hypothesis Two

		Levene's Test for Quality of Variances		t-Test for Quality of Means						
		F	Sig	f	Df	Sig.(2 tailed)	Mean Difference	STD Error Difference	95% Confidence interval of the Difference	
Senior and junior staff	Equal variances assumed	.136	.004	2.692	376	.097	.65000	.38412	-.12153	1.42153
	Equal variances not assumed			1.671	38.841	.103	.65000	.38894	-.13682	1.43682

Source; Questionnaire Survey 2018

Given a significance level of 0.05, that is at 95% level of significance and the p value = .004 > 0.05, equal variance was assumed. For a 2-tail test, the significance of 0.000 < 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected while the alternate hypothesis accepted at 376 degree of freedom. The study therefore found that adequate information

available to management significantly assists in resolving conflicts in FMC Asaba ($t = 2.692$, $p = 0.004$).

H₀₃: Public relations do not play a significant role of in resolving conflicts in FMC Asaba

Table 5: Responses to Whether Public Relations Play Effective Role in Conflict Resolution in the Organization.

	Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
a.	Yes	270	87.1
b.	No	12.9	19
	Total	310	100

Source: Field Survey, 2018

Table 6: Analysis of Chi-square Result

	Hyp 4
Chi-square(a)	376.360
Df	4
Asymp. Sig.	.000

a 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 71.2.

Given a degree of freedom of 4, the result indicates that public relations play a significant role in resolving conflicts in FMC Asaba with 4 degree of freedom = 376.36, $p = 0.000$.

Conclusion

The existence of Public Relations unit with readily available qualified Public Relations personnel at the FMC Asaba will ensure effective public relations practices in the organization. This also enables the public relations' team to effectively package and implements public relations programs during conflicts in the organization, especially the ones arising from patients.

The use of public relations tools to provide the right and adequate information to the relevant public at the right time using the right channels to understand the situation and obtaining favourable publicity makes public relations an effective tool for managing the organization's image during conflicts.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made;

1. Management should ensure that the public relations team continues to be trained and retrained so as to be equipped with modern public relations knowledge and skills. This will ensure that they keep abreast with development in modern public relations practice.
2. Management should continue to make adequate budgetary provisions to the public relations unit to enable the unit finance the media adequately. This will help sustain their effectiveness in their work at the hospital.
3. The public relations team should always embark on research and come up with modern knowledge of image laundering in times of crisis. This will ensure that they package effective proactive public relations measures that will always nip conflicts in the bud.
4. For effective laundering during crisis, the public relations team should always provide the right information at the right time to employees as well as the media. While it will help ensure effective employees relations, it will also ensure establishment of effective media relations. This will help the organization to obtain favourable publicity during crisis.
5. The public relations team should always bear in mind that the organization's image is at stake when there is conflict in the organization. To this end, they should always

be ready to fight propaganda through adequate and effective communication with internal and external publics.

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