

EFFECT OF COMMUNITY RELATIONS PRACTICE ON REPUTATION OF FEDERAL UNIVERSITIES IN THE SOUTH EAST, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to examine the community relations practice and reputation of the universities in the South East, Nigeria. Specifically, the study aimed to pursue the following objectives: to determine the effect of engagement in effective communication with the host communities' stakeholders on reputation of the Universities; to ascertain the effect of promotion of healthy environmental practices in host communities on reputation of the Universities; to evaluate the effect of agricultural campaigns programmes for the host communities on reputation of the universities. This study used survey research method and employed purposive sampling technique. A sample size of 400 was drawn from the population of 13,833,336. The study relied on structured questionnaire as instrument for the collection of primary data. The quantitative data collected were presented with frequency distribution tables and analyzed with weighted mean score. The findings show that the majority of the respondents affirmed that community relations practices attract goodwill and positive reputation to the Universities. Also, the findings indicate that the respondents accepted that the engagement in effective communication with the host communities' stakeholders has effect on reputation of the universities. The study concluded that deliberate engagement in community relations practices by the universities in their host communities have benefits not just to the host communities but to the Universities. The study recommended that the Universities should constantly engage the host communities' stakeholders through effective communication in order to ensure that community relations policies are well formulated and articulated with the objective to impact positively on host communities' affairs and reputation of the universities.

Keywords: Community Relations, Reputation Management, Effective Communication, University Management

Introduction

Community relations is an aspect of public relations. It focuses mainly on how to ensure an enabling and conducive environment in the host community, so that the institution can carry out its responsibility without hindrance, but rather with the aid and co-operation of the members of the host community. Community relations is a problem solving process and this involves strategic analysis of the problem, planning, taking action, and evaluating programme effectiveness, inadequacies or outright failures (Onabanjo, 2005 cited in Alabi and Ntukekpo, 2012).

All over the world, Universities as social institutions are dedicated to teaching, research and community service. It is in this context that a University is said to have three basic mandates which include: to promote knowledge reproduction and develop manpower through teaching; to expand frontiers of knowledge through research, and to engage in community development and good relations through community relations practices (Okojie; Oloyede and Obanya, 2010). Though, other institutions in the society may engage in one or the other mandates, but it is the Universities that are uniquely charged with the simultaneous performance of all the three mandates. Universities as ivory towers are domain of academic elitism in which the promotion of

knowledge reproduction and development of manpower through teaching and expanding frontiers of knowledge through research are emphasized.

There seems to be a general consensus from empirical studies that engagement in community relations practices can deliver benefits not just to the host community but to the Universities. Osemene (2012) identified benefits that may accrue to any University that engages in community relations practice as: building understanding, goodwill, positive public opinion, support and acceptability in its environment, being a good neighbour and cultivating good relationship with the publics including the host community. Universities especially in the developed world organize their community relations practice in a manner that benefit the staff and students as well as members of the host communities for which such programmes are organized (Agbanu, 2013). In the United States of America for example, most of the Universities have community relations service centres where some dedicated and concerned staff regularly reflect on how the Universities can affect their host communities.

Akinfeleye (2010) stated that it may be right to state that there is a serious need to accelerate the pace of community relations practice in Nigeria, especially at the community level, given the fact that about 80% of Nigerians live there. The emergency of Universities in Nigeria marked the watershed in the development of the nation's manpower and professionals. However, since the late 80's when it became clear that Nigeria economy was in problem which affected allocation to the Federal Universities, the level of community relations practices of the Universities had been affected (Nwodu, 2017). Onah (2001) stated that issues of community relations practice have not only dominated discourses in the Nigerian socio-political space in recent times, but have also become a national concern. This is because there appears from cursory observations marked neglect by the Universities to implement the community relations practices in their host communities. Interestingly, this has created a dire need for efforts to be holistically channelled towards the area.

Obviously, one may not expect Universities to fund projects in their host communities but there are certain community relations practices that do not require fund which the Universities can embark on and they include: engagement in effective communication with the host communities' stakeholders; promoting healthy environmental practices like organizing sanitation exercise for the host communities' markets; encouraging agricultural projects like sensitization on modern farming techniques; organizing public enlightenment lectures, seminars and conferences on issues that affect the host communities, employment of natives and, conducting skills acquisition training programmes.

Casual observation shows that Universities might not have done enough in the area of community relations practices in their host communities. The management of the Universities often blame it on poor funding of the Universities by the government and recently on the introduction of Treasury Single Account through which the fees paid by the students are transferred to the federal government account. Invariably, Ekwueme (2010) stated that Universities located in communities need to court the friendship, support and trust of the communities where they are located in order to gain peaceful co-existence with the host communities. This is in line with the submission of Nnabuko (2007), which stated that every institution aims to survive, be effective and grow, hence rigorous planning is undertaken for it is said that any institution that fails to plan, plans to fail.

Statement of the Problem

Although, there are many research findings on community relations practice in host community, some of these findings only succeeded in establishing the relevance and application of community relations strategies in the host community. These studies did not, however, dwell much on community relations practice and reputation of universities in the South East, Nigeria. It

is against this background that it becomes pertinent to evaluate the community relations practice and reputation of Universities in the South East, Nigeria.

Research Questions

This study focused on answering the following questions:

1. What is the effect of engagement in effective communication with the host communities' stakeholders on reputation of the Universities?
2. What effect does the promotion of healthy environmental practices in host communities have on reputation of the Universities?
3. What is the effect of agricultural campaigns programmes for the host communities on reputation of the Universities?.

Review of Literature

The concept of Community Relations

Community relations deals with how institution through good deeds relates with the communities where it operates. This ensures stability in business operations. It is an aspect of public relations that has to do with the establishing understanding between an institution and the host community. It also, uses a sustained line of communication, action and reaction aimed at maintaining good relationship with the operational base of a company through a lot of programmes, and projects including developmental projects. An institution through community relations tries to endear itself to the community from where it operates. This is part of the corporate social responsibility activities of an institution that are aimed at being a good corporate citizen and being seen to be so by the publics within the host community (Nworgu,2007).

Community relations is the social responsibility of the operating corporate body in any given locality. It is a corporate obligation that has to be pursued with dedication and caution. Therefore, community relations programmes have to be planned and well-funded. The people living in a community expect the institutions operating in their area to fulfill certain social and economic services. Business also derives some benefits from the community schools which provide for the educated workers; the churches and mosque provide the dwellers with good conduct and good moral; the local government provides basic infrastructural amenities such as sanitary and health services, radio programmes, electricity, water supply. In return, the people of the community expect institutions operating in their communities to provide employment, satisfactory conditions of service, to flood their markets with goods at reasonable and fair prices; to provide trading opportunities to the people in the community (Duyile, 2006).

Effective communication

Effective communication helps to bridge information gap between the Universities and their host communities. This enhances stakeholders' relations. In stakeholders' relationship in community relations, a mutual, reciprocal and cordial relationship is expected to develop between the organization (University) and various interest groups. Perhaps, the solution to stakeholder crisis in relationship is the increase in effective communication between the parties involved (Nworgu, 2007). Ajala (2001) stated that effective communicator uses both nonverbal and verbal signals to get their messages across. Nwele and Onuorah (2015) noted that effective communication is a two way information sharing means that involves one person sending a message that is easily understood by the receiving person. Effective communication for the business managers enhances information sharing between institution's employees, its publics and can substantially lead to the commercial benefit or success of the institution.

Aliede (2005) cited in Aliede (2015) averred that effective communication is a vital element for ensuring harmony which is a necessary prerequisite for progress, development and sustainability

in the community. This can be the case in the family, church, community or any kind of organization. Effective communication is consistent and professional packaged information targeted to achieve harmony and mutual understanding between the institution and the host community. This is as a result of the fact that every individual in the society needs to know what is going on within and outside his/ her immediate environment for him/ her to function and participate as an active member of the community..

Healthy environmental practices

Nwosu and Uffoh (2005) stated that we cannot neglect local communities in any effort to manage environmental problems and issues. Managing environmental issues and problems help properly to mobilize the members of the host communities to ensure the highest level of participation and partnership with them from the beginning of any environmental promotion or protection project to the end. Mitchel and Levy (2014) pointed-out that in Britain between 1985 and 1989, the use of the phrase “environmentally friendly” in a sample of printed media leapt from once a month to 30 times a day. Nwosu and Uffoh (2005) stated that one of the great tragedies facing environmental management, especially in the developing countries is ignorance of the issues and problems of the environment. To secure a worthy environmental legacy both for ourselves and for future generations, we must find ways to reconcile humanity more satisfactorily with the natural systems and the environment upon which all human life and civilization depend.

Mustapha (2008) believed that the centrality of healthy environment to development and emancipation of all living being is unquestionable. Beyond the global efforts, every nation possesses institutions that champion the health affairs and matters of its citizenry. These institutions are saddled with the responsibility of preparing and overseeing policies that are made to assist in the actualization of the broad goals. Lofty as these goals are, they received minimal implementation efforts.

Agricultural campaign programmes

Moguluwa (2016) stated that executing campaign involves presenting behaviour changing messages to the target group or audience in such a way that they would be sufficiently convinced to adopt them as intended new behaviour. Ezeah, Apeh, Omerigwe and Ojo (2014) noted that campaign must be prepared in a way to accommodate many factors and issues that are vital to make the exercise successful and reduce lack of access to important agricultural information by farmers in developing nations. Farmers need to be updated on agricultural practice that will enable them to improve in their productivity and income. Farming is seriously needed for mass food production and as a vital source for raw material for industrial development. Isika (2014) stressed that agriculture in Nigeria is still at subsistence level and the farmer can rarely cater for his immediate family and the majority of the urban population depends on him.

Watson and Hill (1993) maintained that campaign is a concept that most often used to refer to a conscious, structures and co-ordinated attempt at persuading members of the general public who utilize the mass media. Campaign is an aspect of the communication process or a continuing operation targeted at passing out useful information which is designed to convert people from a state of ignorance to that of awareness regarding that which is to be shared. Every campaign has its specific and overt objective to achieve and influence its targeted audience. A campaign is suppose to consist of several media with the chances of reaching and effecting varying according to the established nature of the channels and the message content. The cardinal objective of campaign is to educate and enlighten its target on a given new idea or techniques.

Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on two-way symmetric theory. The major tenets of this theory is fundamental to the appreciation of the issue under study.

Two-way symmetric theory is the fourth theory of public relations as advanced by Grunig and Hunt (1984). Nwosu (1996) noted that this theory uses (community relations) research not only to shape messages, but to effect positive change. This theory strives to put in place good information gathering and information servicing systems, a process of functional feedback opportunities to get the Universities and their host communities together. Also, this theory is relevant to this study because the Universities cannot do without the peaceful and mutual understanding with their host communities which can be achieved through effective community relations practices. Smooth and profitable operations through effective community relations practices by the Universities for their host communities become imperative.

Methodology

Research Design

Bearing the objectives of this study in mind, the survey research method was used for this task. Nwodu (2006) explained that survey research method focuses on a representative sample derived from the entire population of study.

The area of this study is South East, Nigeria. The geo-political zone is made up of five states which include: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States.

Population of the Study

This consisted of the total population of the host communities of the five Federal Universities located at the South East, Nigeria. Based on 2006 Census conducted by the National Population Commission (NPC), the following population of the five Federal Universities' host communities emerged:

Table 1.1: List of five Federal Universities in the South East and the population of their host communities

Nos.	Federal Universities	States	Host communities (main campuses)	Population of the host communities
1.	University of Nigeria Nsukka	Enugu	Nsukka	309,633
2.	Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka	Anambra	Ifite-Awka	41,832
3.	Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ikwo	Ebonyi	Ndufu-Alike, Ikwo	214,969
4.	Federal University of Technology, Owerri	Imo	Owerri municipal	125,337
5.	Michael Okpara Federal University of Agriculture Umudike	Abia	Umudike	223,134
	Total	5	5	914,905

Source: 2006 census by NPC

However, considering the fact that 2006 is too far a time, the researcher aligned himself with Owuamalam (2012), which maintained that the population of Nigerians has increased

significantly since the last census which was held in 2006, and did a projection of 13 years (2006- 2022= 16) using an annual growth rate of 3.2 per cent (UNDP cited in Owuamalam, 2012). The projection formula provides that $P_p = G_p \times P_i \times T$

Thus, $P_p = 914,905$, $P_i = 3.2\%$ or 0.032

$T = 2022 - 2006 = 16$

$P_p = 914,905 \times 0.032 \times 16 = 468,431.36$

When added to the population of the host communities, it will be: $914,905 + 468,431 = 13,833,336$. The population of this study, therefore, is 13,833,336

Based on this, the sample size of 400 was determined using Taro Yamane simplified formula.

This study used purposive sampling technique. This method of sampling, Nwodu (2006) observed that it is often called judgmental sampling. Here, the respondents were selected on condition that they meet certain criteria.

Reliability of the Instrument

Cronbach's Alpha method was used to determine the reliability of the data collection instrument and reliability co-efficient of 0.760 was obtained. Uzoagulu (2011) stated that a high correlation gives credence that the instrument is highly reliable. Hence, it can be used to obtain data for the investigation.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Findings

In this study, as noted earlier, 400 copies of the structured questionnaire were distributed to the respondents. However, a total of 397 copies of structured questionnaire were returned, two (2) copies of structured questionnaire were not returned while one (1) copy of structured questionnaire was mutilated.. Thus, 397 copies of structured questionnaire constituted the actual number of validly returned structured questionnaire used in the analysis.

Also, in this subsection, data generated from the respondents (apart from the demographic profile or data) were presented in Likert's 5-points scale wherein the point of decision (acceptance or rejection) is 3 or 3.0. The implication is that when response rate is equal or greater than 3.0, it means that it is accepted while it remains rejected if it is less than 3.0. The point of decision is noted by Weighted Mean Scores in the table

Research Question 1: What is the effect of engagement in effective communication with the host communities' stakeholders on reputation of Universities?

Table 1.1: The effect of engagement in effective communication

S/N	Engagement in effective communication	Responses in mean scores					WMS	DECESION
		SA	A	N A	D	SD		
1.	Communication enhances mutual relationship.	150	147	50	30	20	3.950	Accepted
2.	The communication between the Universities and their host communities is effective.	40	35	45	121	156	2.199	Rejected
3.	The engagement in effective communication with the host	185	101	35	20	56	3.854	Accepted

	communities' stakeholders has significant relationship with the reputation of the Universities.							
4.	The engagement in effective communication with the host communities' stakeholders has effect on reputation of the Universities.	37	43	56	104	157	2.242	Rejected

Table 1.1 shows that respondents accepted the views in item numbers 1 and 3. This means that Universities strive for favourable reputation which can be achieved by engagement in effective communication with the host communities' stakeholders. However, respondents rejected views in item numbers 2 and 4. The implication is that the relationship between the Universities and their host communities is not cordial.

Research Question 2: What effect does the promotion of healthy environmental practices in host communities have on reputation of the Universities?

Table 1.2: The effect of the promotion of healthy environmental practices in host communities

S/N	Promotion of Healthy Environmental Practices	Responses in mean scores					WMS	DECISION
		SA	A	NA	D	SD		
5.	Universities support healthy environmental practices as cardinal policy in their host communities.	70	37	30	122	138	2.443	Rejected
6.	Universities engage in environmental sanitation in their host communities.	59	40	47	105	146	2.398	Rejected
7.	The promotion of healthy environmental practices in the host communities has significant relationship with the reputation of the Universities.	137	176	38	33	13	3.985	Accepted
8.	The promotion of healthy environmental practices in their host communities has effect on reputation of the Universities.	48	72	40	107	130	2.299	Rejected

The table 1.2 shows that respondents rejected the views in item numbers 5, 6 and 8 respectively. This means that the promotion of healthy environmental practices in their host communities has no effect on reputation of the Universities. While the respondents accepted the views in item number 7.

Research Question 3: What is the effect of agricultural campaigns programmes for the host communities on reputation of the Universities?

Table 1.3: The effect of agricultural campaigns programmes for the host communities

S/N	Agricultural Campaign Programmes	Responses in mean scores					WMS	DECESION
		SA	A	N A	D	SD		
9.	Agricultural campaign programmes empower the host communities' farmers with information.	160	130	32	40	35	3.856	Accepted
10.	Campaign programme is needed to sensitize the host communities to adopt innovation in agriculture.	140	125	45	36	51	3.673	Accepted
11.	The agriculture campaigns programme for the host communities have significant relationship with the reputation of the Universities.	25	31	12	157	172	1.942	Rejected
12.	The agriculture campaign programmes for the host communities have effect on reputation of the Universities.	137	162	31	53	14	3.894	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2022

Table 1.3 shows that respondents accepted the views in item numbers 9, 10 and 12. This means that agriculture campaign programmes for the host communities have effect on reputation of the Universities. While, the respondents rejected the view in item number 11.

Discussion of Findings

The data generated for this study were discussed according to the research questions that precipitated them. Hence, the research questions are firstly presented and then, the results are used in answering them.

Research Question 1: What is the effect of engagement in effective communication with the host communities' stakeholders on reputation of the Universities?

The findings from table 1.1 showed that the respondents accepted that the engagement in effective communication with the host communities' stakeholders has effect on reputation of the Universities. It engenders peaceful and mutual understanding between the host communities and the Universities. Additionally, the fact that it attracts good reputation and goodwill to the Universities supports the view of Nworgu (2007), that maintained that effective communication helps to bridge information gap between the Universities and their host communities. This enhances stakeholders' relations and ensures positive corporate image for the Universities.

Research Question 2: What effect does the promotion of healthy environmental practices in host communities have on reputation of the Universities?

The answer to the above findings is found in table 1.2 which showed that respondents rejected the view that the promotion of healthy environmental practices in their host communities has effect on reputation of the Universities. Regrettably, the respondents were not sure if any University embarks on such exercise. The results of this study is in accordance with the assertion of Nwosu & Uffoh (2005), who found out that one of the great tragedies facing environmental management, especially in the developing countries is ignorance of the issues and problems of the environment. To secure a worthy environmental legacy (and promotion) both for ourselves and for future

generations, we must find ways to reconcile humanity more satisfactorily with the natural systems and the environment upon which all human life and civilization depend.

Research Question 3: What is the effect of agricultural campaigns programmes for the host communities on reputation of the Universities?

The result in table 1.3 provided answers to the above research question as it revealed that respondents accepted that agricultural campaigns programmes for the host communities have effect on reputation of the Universities. The effect is enormous. It helps in image building and good reputation for the Universities. The result of this study supports the assertion of Ezeah, Apeh, Omerigwe and Ojo (2014), which noted that campaigns must be prepared in a way to accommodate many factors and issues that are vital to make the exercise successful and reduce lack of access to important agricultural information by farmers in developing nations.

Summary of Findings

After examining the research questions raised in this study, it was discovered that:

1. Majority of the respondents accepted that the engagement in effective communication with the host communities' stakeholders has effect on reputation of the Universities. It encourages the stakeholders' relationship and ensures positive corporate image for the Universities.
2. Additionally, the study discovered that the respondents rejected the view that the promotion of healthy environmental practices in their host communities has effect on reputation of the Universities. Regrettably, the respondents were not sure if any University embarks on such exercise.
3. The study further revealed that majority of the respondents accepted that agricultural campaigns programmes for the host communities have effect on reputation of the Universities.

Conclusion

The study therefore, conclude based on the foregoing that deliberate engagement in community relations practices by the Universities in their host communities have benefits not just to the host communities but to the Universities. However, one may not expect Universities to fund projects in their host communities but majority of the respondents accepted that there are certain community relations practices that do not require fund which the Universities can engage in and they include: engagement in effective communication with the host communities' stakeholders; promotion of healthy environmental practices; encouraging agricultural projects; employment of natives and encouragement of skills acquisition training programmes. The study seriously affirmed that continuous implementation of these community relations practices will certainly enhance the reputation of the Universities and attract goodwill.

Recommendations

Having examined the community relations practice and reputation of Universities in South East, Nigeria, the following recommendations were made:

1. The Universities should constantly engage the host communities' stakeholders through effective communication in order to ensure that community relations policies are well formulated and articulated with the objective to impact positively on host communities' affairs and reputation of the Universities.
2. Regrettably, majority of the respondents were not sure if any University embarks on promotion of healthy environmental practices in host communities, hence, more efforts should be made by the Universities to adopt the promotion of healthy environmental practices as cardinal policies of

their institutions. However, it is sad that most of these Universities fail to realize the glaring implications of non-implementation of community relations practices.

3. The Universities through their Public Relations Officers should work harder to improve the agricultural campaigns programmes for their host communities in order to enhance their knowledge on modern agricultural techniques.

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