As we all know it is only in the twentieth century that public relations came to be codified, formalized and practiced as a profession. However, it is as old as the human race. Every organization, institution, and individual has [**public relations**](http://www.theyellowcoincommunication.com/service/public-relations/) whether or not that fact is recognized. As long as there are people, living together in communities, working together in organizations, and forming a society, there will be an intricate web of relationships among them.

The good will of the public is the greatest asset that any organization can have. A public that is well and factually informed is not only important; without’ it, an organization cannot survive long. Therefore, the starting point for good public relations in any organization is the development of sound policies that are in the public interest. Public understanding and approval must be deserved before they can be earned.

Society is increasingly becoming complex with emerging issues and challenges that require creative and imaginative solutions from those involved. With the on-going process of globalization, access to information through the ever-dynamic communication technologies are exposing individuals to new realities that promote new tastes, expectations and demands on product and service producers in places like Nigeria. For the business sector where competition is getting stiffer by the day, the challenges to remain profitably in business with appreciable public support and understanding are indeed enormous. What with the growing national and international competitions, complex and challenging operational climate, hostile surrounding communities, growing expectations, security issues, depressed nature of the economy, increasing poverty among the general population, rising costs of production, unending demands from labour, unpredictable government policies, expensive media services, etc. These and many more issues continue to challenge the performance of companies and other private sector concerns in the country. In other words, managements of businesses have to deal with complex environmental issues that affect their businesses in continuously changing and challenging circumstances like what we are currently experiencing in Nigeria.

Thus, multiple institutional strategies that include effective public relations are evolved and implemented to ensure that their businesses succeed and the public understand and appreciate their existence. Among the most effective and highly reliable options for achieving such objectives is the establishment and sustenance of functional public relations units. Such units facilitate an organization’s capacity to anticipate and adapt to societal demands and trends that positively impact on a company’s image and reputation that result in a better operating environment; and smoothing and enhancing a company’s operations, which can lead to increase in sales (Lattimore et al, 2004).

**PUBLIC RELATIONS**

Public Relations is often misunderstood by many people to mean protocol issues, handing money to media people, sweet stories that mean nothing and above all, beautiful dressing. However, public relations is far more than that. In a company, public relations involves attitude and practice; first, is the attitude of the company to its publics; and second, the practice of public relations in the company by experts who are specialized in the art and science of public communication. Both company attitude and the practice of PR by the relevant professionals are critical in achieving the desired objectives for the enterprise.

Public relations have been variously defined. One of such definitions says that public relations practice “is the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organization’s leadership, and implementing planned programmes of action, which will serve both the organization’s and the public interest” (Black, 2001). In simple terms, the Public Relations Unit of a company is expected to compose of trained professionals who can analyze trends and events, predict how they are likely to affect the fortunes of the company, particularly from the perspective of the public and the preparation and implementation of any carefully designed programmes that are aimed at securing, maintaining and continuously building public support, understanding and appreciation for the company, its products, services and leadership. Through public relations, cooperative social relations are built in the interest of the public and the company. This is very crucial as any loss of public confidence and support may result in damaging and devastating consequences for the organization.

Organizations have different publics depending on the nature of their focus. It is always strategic to be fully conversant with the publics that the company relates with at each point in time – categories, characteristics, tastes, needs, expectations, etc. These publics are generally categorized as internal and external publics. The internal publics consist of the employees and other interested groups within the company. The external publics include various segments like the surrounding communities, various branches and agencies of government, different categories of consumers in the market, business partners, security agencies, etc.

Quite often, we erroneously think that public relations is only practiced by those who work in the Public Relations Unit. Far from it! The ideal is that every member of staff, particularly the managers are expected to reflect, manifest and practice public relations in all that they do. In fact, the CEO of the company is the number one Public Relations Officer.

To achieve the PR objective of developing cooperative relationships between companies and the society, it may be important to identify the various segments of public relations practice (Lattimore et al, 2004):

 **Media Relations:** This is a strategy to gain the support and sympathy of the print and the broadcast media, to generate positive publicity and to always be able to tell your own side of the story.

 **Employee Relations:** This is to help in ensuring peaceful and harmonious labour relations and also facilitate the recruitment and retention of quality employees. Effective employee communication has been adjudged to be functional to enhanced employee productivity, positive attitude and high morale.

 **Community Relations:** Improves the quality of public service offered.

 **Consumer Relations:** Builds positive relations with customers, responds effectively to consumer complaints and supports sales and marketing efforts.

 **Public Affairs:** Deals with the company’s interaction with different branches and levels of government. Relating with government is very important in creating a conducive operational environment (on issues like taxes, policies, etc).

**PUBLIC RELATIONS ACTIVITIES**

As indicated earlier, public relations involves anticipating trends and predicting consequences that are likely to affect a company’s fortunes. To this end, public relations managers or officers are expected to be highly proactive, have analytical minds and be strategic in thinking. With these in mind, it is also hoped that the organization’s public relations will focus on all or some of these aspects of importance:

 **Corporate Image/Reputation:** it is the duty of the PR unit to fully understand and monitor the public, corporate and general individual perception of the company at each point of time. This will facilitate the process of planning based on public opinion.

 **Strategic Planning:** gauging in advance the possible reception and impact of messages received from the company

 **Message Measurement:** monitoring or measuring the reception and impact of messages released by the organization and advising on how they can be amended, reviewed or dealt with.

 **Development of specific messages** for the various distinct groups

 **Communication and Message Management:** This involves the disseminating of messages to large, heterogeneous and scattered publics in speed, precision and with maximum effect. This is why the PRO is better placed to influence news reports, their reportage from certain perspectives; and the general management of information in the company in general.

**SKILLS FOR SUCCESS IN CORPORATE PUBLIC RELATIONS**

Contemporary public relations require highly qualified and very resourceful professionals to positively drive the wheel of PR in the company. Thus, it is just not anybody that can be posted to the PR office by the management. It is important that whoever that practices PR in a competitive environment is expected to possess the following basic qualities.

 **Versatility:** Such a fellow must have broad range of competences, abilities and courage to apply same as the situation arises or the demand comes up.

 **Good writing and research skills:** This is important for the PR officers to undertake research on a variety of issues particularly those that affect the company and its environment. Equally, a good writing ability enables the officer to write press releases, publishable articles, edit materials, and coordinate productions of communication materials.

 **Good analytical skills:** The ability to diagnose, understand and solve communication problems. Based on that, it could be easy to develop strategic communication plans that could guide the public relations activities of the company.

 **Positive attitudes**: Having positive attitudes and friendly disposition facilitates relations with management and the other publics

 **Good command of the English Language**

**PUBLIC RELATIONS AND CREDIBILITY**

Credibility based on honesty promotes business enterprises. A credible enterprise can easily exert positive influence on the public. It is important that the public perceive them as honest, responsible and even caring. Once, the trust between the public and the enterprise is shaken, there may be wrong judgments that may lead to unwanted consequences for the company.

Thus, to remain relevant and credible in an increasingly competitive environment, companies through their PR units should, from time to time, engage in public education on what they do, the challenging nature of their activities, their perceived threats, etc. Such regular provision of corporate information keeps the reputation of the organization alive in the mind of the public. In the words of Lattimore (2004), reputations are earned by following through, by being trustworthy and by doing the right actions. Public relations helps counsel management and its publics in determining what the correct course to take is.”

**Achieving and Maintaining Credibility:**

 Be open and honest

 Be consistent in actions

 Be socially responsible

 Engage in public education

**CHALLENGES**

Public relations practice and practitioners in both government and private companies face

numerous challenges that affect the performance of their duties. Few among them are:

 Poor understanding of the place and practice of PR in many private enterprises

 Non-recruitment of experts in PR departments

 Low budgetary allocations

 Low attention to plans and suggestions from PR units

**THE WAY FORWARD**

 Companies and their managements need to have a correct perception and understanding of the place and role of PR in their hierarchical set ups

 Based on the above, they should endeavor to recruit the right persons in terms of intellectual standing and attitudinal disposition. Avail them opportunities for strengthening their capacities through continuous training exercises, travels and visits, wide interactions and participation in community, national and international events to increase the visibility of their enterprises

 Allocate fair budgets to PR units for them to perform optimally

 Companies should support their PR units to develop and implement strategic communication plans.

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