

IMPERATIVES OF PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES AND NIGERIA VISION 20:20:20 DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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Abstract

Public relations strategies are potent factors for the promotion of two-way communication that foster mutual understanding, healthy relationships and individual commitment to the achievement of mutually-set goals. Nigeria Vision 20:2020, introduced in 2010, was aimed at propelling the nation to the league of the world's top 20 economies by the year 2020 through achieving significant improvement in the well-being of the citizens, developing the economy to be globally competitive, stabilizing and making more functional the nation's democratic system, and protecting the ecological environment. However, most citizens, individual and corporate, have no clear understanding of the importance of Vision 20:2020, and are, therefore, yet to express their willingness to support the efforts towards its realization. The study, divided into four sections, namely, conceptual review, theoretical review, empirical review, and conclusion and recommendations, adopts a descriptive and conceptual review methodology. It reviews the concept and strategies of public relations as they apply to Nigeria's prevailing issues of sustainable development, and argues that the implementation of stakeholder forums, sponsorships, celebrity endorsement and buzz will result in improved level of awareness, buy-in and commitment to the goals achievement. This study recommends that government agencies should be more proactive and intentional in executing public relations strategies for the propagation of the Vision 20:2020

Keywords: *Public Relations, Nigeria Vision 20:2020, Awareness, Goals Achievement, and Sustainable Development*

Background to the Study

Nigeria, a nation described as the largest economy in Africa is, ironically, still inundated with myriads of developmental challenges. The undesirable conditions have persisted in spite of various developmental plans which the government introduced and attempted to execute at various times, especially, in the last two decades. Development planning is not a novel idea in Nigeria, the country having had its initial experience with the Colonial Development Plan (1958-1968). Thereafter, fixed medium-term development plans and National Rolling Plans were also developed and implemented albeit with little success. The Structural Adjustment Programme, National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the 7-Point Agenda are the other strategic efforts antecedent to the Nigeria Vision 20:2020 (NV 20:2020) which was introduced in 2010, and has as its vision statement thus: "By 2020, Nigeria will have a large, strong, diversified, sustainable and competitive economy that effectively harnesses the talents and energies of its people and responsibly exploits its natural endowments to guarantee a high standard of living and quality of life to its citizens".

Evidently, not much of the Vision's goals have so far been realized, and low level of awareness among the generality of the citizenry appears to be major contributory factor to this undesirable situation. The effort of government functionaries towards sharing the vision might have been inadequate. Nwammuo, Edogo, and Asemah (2013) observe that effective communication of the Vision's objectives and goals will facilitate its acceptance and individual cooperation to work towards its realization. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the principal vehicle for engaging all key stakeholders towards the implementation of sustainable development is effective communication. Tagged the 'lifeblood' of a strategy, communication fosters cooperation and collaboration, which are critical success factors in task implementation (see OECD 2002 cited in RioPlus, 2008).

Public relations is one of the primary marketing communications tools widely used to create awareness, build relationships and achieve sales or adoption of views, products or services. Ledingham and Bruning (2000) assert that public relations serve a strategic communications function for relationship management. Many organizations have found the use of public relations attractive due to its positive attributes and outcomes, among which are conveying high credibility, high dispersion rate of message, and relatively low cost of usage compared to advertising (Fill, 2009).

Statement of the Problem

Though a half of the life span of Nigeria Vision 20:2020 is almost spent, a wide gap can be observed between its stated goals and their implementation. On the part of government agencies, other institutions, organizations, as well as the general public, a serious level of commitment towards the realization of NV20:2020 goals is not apparent. It is rather observed that in typical rural areas an average Nigerian appear to be ignorant of NV 20:2020 provisions. Poor level of awareness of the essence and strategic importance of the Vision pose a major barrier to its successful implementation.

Objective of the Study

The central objective of the study is to demonstrate how public relations strategies influence relationship building between an organization or a government and its stakeholders. Its specific objective, however, is to buttress the fact that public relations strategies potentially contribute to the achievement of a high level of awareness about the importance of Nigeria Vision 20:2020, thereby encouraging positive attitude of citizens towards the Vision, as well as their commitment and cooperation towards its successful implementation.

Methodology

The study adopts the descriptive and conceptual review research design. This approach is considered appropriate because the presentation dwells on conceptual, theoretical and empirical materials on public relations strategies primarily drawn from current literature and other secondary sources as they practically apply to Nigeria's prevailing issues of sustainable development. Divided into four sections, namely, conceptual review, theoretical review, empirical review, and conclusion and recommendations, the study demonstrates the special characteristics of public relations as a unique element of the marketing communications mix.

Conceptual Review of Literature

Concept of Sustainable Development

Issues relating to sustainable development have engaged the attention of the academia, governments, and various other entities the world over for over three decades. The subject took the front burner in international discourse as a result of endemic and emergent societal problems that portend threats to national and global peace and prosperity. In 1987 the World Commission on Environment and Development released The Brundtland Report, a document that promotes the principle of sustainable development to counter the alarming rate of population growth, resource depletion, loss of biodiversity, environmental degradation, and poverty. The United Nations Brundtland Commission Report (Our Common Future) defines sustainable development as the ability to meet the needs of the

present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Sustainable development is also defined as a kind of development that can be initiated and managed properly in such a way as to give attention to continuity and preservation as people explore an explicit available resources for the enlargement of their existence (Adebola, 2007). Lasting improvement in the quality of life and not just short-term improvements that disappear rapidly at the end of the project circle is the consummate goal of sustainable development (Ulluiwishewa, 1993:20) cited in Achimugu, Abubakar, Agboni, and Orokpo (2012). Judging from these definitions, it is clear that sustainable development is a worthy pursuit for any modern society.

The Nigeria Vision 20:2020

Nigeria's formulation of suitable sustainable development plans from time to time, therefore, is not unexpected. The Nigeria Vision 20:2020 is a critical initiative taking into consideration its highly transformational goals. The focus of its social goal is on the provision of social services such as functional health care, basic education, employment for youth, clean water, security of life and properties, and access to quality infrastructures. The economic goal aims at achieving a balance in all sectors of the economy in the process of production of goods and services. Among the issues that must be redressed under the economic goal include unemployment, low per capital income, poverty, low capital formation, inflation, resource mobilization inefficiencies, inequitable distribution of home, and over- dependence on a single commodity (petroleum oil) as the primary source of income. Under the environmental goal, the government intends to tackle issues of environmental degradation arising from erosion, oil spillage, gas flaring, industrial effluents, and other environmentally-harmful activities that pose threats to humankind and other living things now and in future. Achievement of the institutional goals bothered on strengthening all levels of government machinery to be able to execute the aspects of NV 20:2020 programmes allocated to them. It also entails periodic measurement and evaluation of implementation progress against set goals, and execution of corrective measures to ensure the goals realization. Among the critical measures for achievement of sustainable development include developing public awareness and understanding (Arogundade, 2011) cited in (Oguejiofor and Ezeabasili, 2014); public awareness and capacity building; and stakeholder participation (Nigeria Country Report, June 2012).

Concept of Public Relations

Kotler and Armstrong (2012) opine that public relations facilitates the building of good relations with a company's various publics by obtaining favorable publicity, building up a good corporate image, and handling or heading off unfavorable rumors, stories, and events relating to such a company. Grunig, Grunig and Dozier (2002) add that public relations contribution is evident in building quality, long-lasting relationships with strategic stakeholders. Ajala (1993) affirms that public relations involves getting in contact with relevant target publics and convincing them of the benefits of a particular argument, giving them reasons why they should support particular issues and causes or to accept an organization's proposals on public issues.

The government can effectively use public relations to increase dialogue with the citizens on policy matters (Hopkins, 2015), and to influence, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its key publics (Stromback and Kioussis, 2011) cited in (Graham and Avery, 2013). In the marketing communications mix, public relations offer the highest level of credibility to a message, thereby increasing the chance of audience acceptance. At this juncture, the discussion focuses on PR strategies, namely, stakeholder forums, sponsorships, celebrity endorsement, and marketing buzz and their potential influence on NV 20:2020 propagation and adoption.

Stakeholder forums

The use of stakeholder forums to encourage participatory policy making and implementation is widely practiced in developed economies. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Individuals Stakeholder Group is HMRC's principal consultation forum for non-business customers and their representative bodies. Odedele (2008) observed that the Kenyan government effectively utilized stakeholder forum as part of its strategy to forge strong ownership of the universal primary education project at its inception. Stakeholder forums are commonly practiced offline, but the presence of the Internet social media facilitates the operation of online forums and communities through which consumers share text, images, audio, and video information with each other and with companies and vice versa (Kotler and Keller, 2012:568). NV 20:2020 might be a very exciting topic on which an open conversation with forum members can be maintained and innovative ideas harvested for its successful execution.

Sponsorships

Sponsorship is a commercial activity in which one party permits another an opportunity to exploit an association with a target audience in return for funds, services or resources (Fill, 2009:600). The sponsoring organization/agency in this

case gains some exposure to particular audiences attracted by the event, and can share important messages, and also influence the target audience to develop positive perceptions about the sponsor or its brand. A number of studies have shown that there is a correlation between sponsorship objectives and the creation of competitive advantage; and also between effort to create goodwill and relationship building with target audiences (Grohs, R., Wagner, U., and Vsetecka, S., 2004; Smith and Taylor, 2010). China's sponsorship of the Olympic Games, provided it a platform to present itself as a global power, and also created for many other companies opportunity to advance their messages. The Nigerian government can popularize NV 20:2020 through sponsoring such events as All Africa Games, Commonwealth Games and so on.

Celebrity Endorsement

Celebrity endorsers bring their positive and unique set of attributes to bear on the image of a brand when associated with a brand. Erdogan and Drollinger (2008) posit that a celebrity endorser can be an effective means of promoting a brand due to the positive meanings that can be shared between the brand and the endorser. Their capacity to attract the attention of a wide audience enable celebrities to cut through the dreaded clutter of advertising, and be able to polish a brand's tarnished image, reposition an existing brand, introduce a new brand, and/or help global advertising (Kaikati, 1987; Miciak and Shanklin, 1994) cited in (Erdogan, 2005). The characteristics of celebrity endorsers such as attractiveness, likeability, expertise, match-up, familiarity, trustworthiness, and identification give them premium advantage as a persuasion mechanism. The use of popular comedians, professional athletes, footballers and performing musicians to endorse a brand or a brand's product or services is a common practice in commercial entities. The Nigeria's telecommunication industry is a typical example. Government agencies and politicians, have on some occasions used this platform successfully, and could still do more with the opportunity. Such celebrities as David O, Lagbaja, Kanu Nwankwo, Zebrudaya and a host of others can be utilized to endorse NV 20:2020.

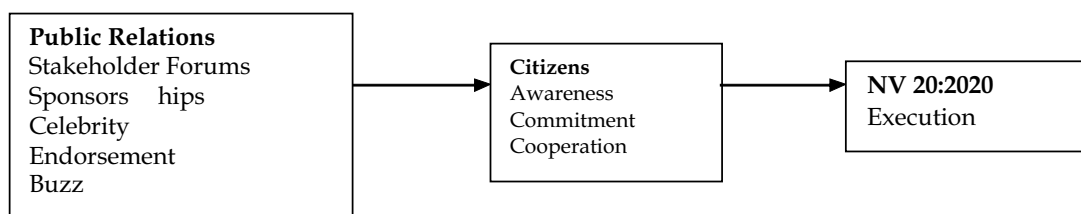
Buzz Marketing

Another platform through which Nigeria Vision 20:2020 adoption can be greatly achieved with little effort and cost is buzz marketing. Kotler & Armstrong (2012) view buzz marketing as the use of unexpected or even an outrageous means to generate excitement create publicity and spread brand-related information among consumers. Through buzz marketing, much excitement is generated, publicity created, and new relevant brand-related information shared through unexpected or even outrageous means. Where the government creates an atmosphere or situations that inspire opinion leaders, celebrities or other citizens to make notable, quotable, exciting short statements about something or about somebody such that catch the

frenzy of the public evoking enthusiastic repetition by many persons amount to buzz. Though buzz is successfully operated offline through word-of-mouth promotion, the social media provides a veritable platform for its massive deployment. A recent survey revealed that many consumers trust opinions stated online, and they make purchase decisions to favour companies discussed online (McKinsey, 2012)

The discourse of this study is further demonstrated with a model presented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Model of NV 20:2020 Implementation through Public Relations



Source: Authors' Conceptualization (2015)

The model of NV 20:2020 presented above illustrates the point that Nigeria Vision 20:2020 can be successfully implemented when awareness has been sufficiently created, citizens' commitment and cooperation fostered through the application of stakeholder forums, sponsorships, celebrity endorsement, and buzz marketing, all instruments of public relations.

Theoretical Review

Buber's dialogic theory based on reciprocity, mutuality, involvement, and openness serves as the theoretical underpinning of this study considering that public relations offers opportunities for a two-way or dialogic process of communication. Dialogue is seen as one of the most ethical forms of communication and a veritable medium to separate truth from falsehood (Kent and Taylor, 2002). Additionally, the behavioral persuasion theory, originally postulated by Pavlov and Skinner (1957) cited in (Anaeto, Onabanjo and Osifeso, 2008), and elaborated in Mullainathan and Shleifer (2005) supports this study. Through dialogue and persuasion the propagation of NV 20:2020-related messages can gain wide acceptance culminating in citizens expressing their commitment and cooperation towards its execution.

Empirical Framework on Public Relations

The findings from Westberg's (2004) study are that the execution of public relations programmes and activities deliver spectacular results to an organization, and have a strong impact on public awareness at a lower cost compared with the advertising.

Some other empirical studies validate the perspective that public relations (PR) activities and programmes make meaningful contributions to the performance of organizations (Kim and Cha, 2014; Huang, 2008; Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier, 2002).

Conclusion

Most Nigerian citizens have little or no knowledge of Nigeria Vision 20:2020 development programme. Even those that know about it are yet to be fully aware of the roles expected of them to play towards its realization. Studies have shown that effective communication, creation of mutual understanding and expression of commitment and cooperation are predictors to successful execution of tasks. Literature and empirical findings make it abundantly clear that the use of public relations involves dialogic communication which fosters awareness creation, building of good and lasting relationships with various publics, building up a good corporate image, and handling or heading off unfavorable rumors, stories, and events relating to a given cause or an organization. Implementation of stakeholder forums, sponsorships, sports, celebrity endorsement and buzz, all public relations strategies, will result in improved level of awareness, buy-in and commitment to the realization of the goals of Nigeria Vision 20:2020. The use of public relations will give much impetus to achievement of sustainable development in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Government need to be more proactive and intentional in executing public relations strategies to disseminate Nigeria Vision 20:2020. The following can be activated towards the set goals:

1. Utilize the services of popular comedians, professional athletes, footballers and performing musicians to execute celebrity endorsement of the NV 20:2020 brand;
2. Organize more Stakeholder forums for communication exchanges so as to harvest more opinions and allow the citizenry to feel a sense of ownership of the Vision;
3. Utilize buzz marketing to generate exciting, trendy word-of mouth statements to popularize Nigeria Vision 20:2020.

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