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**Research Article****THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATION IN BUILDING CORPORATE IMAGE: A STUDY OF  
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Rivers State, Nigeria.**Abstract**

*This paper focuses on the impact of public relations in building corporate image in First Bank of Nigeria Plc Calabar. This research identifies how public relations can help in maintaining high acceptable corporate identify, corporate image and corporate communication. The survey research method was used in this study as the population was picked amongst the internal and external publics of First Bank of Nigeria Plc Calabar. Copies of questionnaire were administered to the respondents to elicit information that helped in the organization of data and presentation. The research showed that public relations can help in uplifting the image of First Bank of Nigeria Plc Calabar. The paper recommended among other things that public relation efforts must ensure that they equally protect and build the image of the firm. This will help create an enabling ground for effective and mutual relationship between the staff, costumer and the general public.*

**Key Words:** Role, Public relation, corporate image, Organization**INTRODUCTION**

Public relations is “practically as old as society” Patrick Jackson, a publisher of the public relation society of America (PRSA) asserts that public relations arose from the basic need of building and improving human relationship. Thus, public relation has been practiced even if

only amateurish, since the beginning of mankind. In ancient societies, human communication was limited by space and time. Due to the absence of modern technology, the potentials and application of public relations increased as societies became more urbanized, civilized and complex. As population

increased so did the need problems of public relations.

Public relations practice in Nigeria was introduced from Britain through the vehicle of colonialism; public relation became an important element in public communication in the colonial days. The government felt the need for another branch of communication which would convey subtly, its feelings to the people without really going through the rigours of mental composition of communication acts. In 1963, the Nigerian Institution of Public Relations (NIPR) was established as a regulatory body for public relation practice in Nigeria.

The responsibility of the public relations unit is to protect the image of the organization to the general public. The public relation practice was designed to protect the image of the organization, plan and execute all its approved public relations programmes. Corporate organizations have been embarking on public relations to create and maintain a mutual understanding with their publics. This study therefore seeks to explore the relevance or the role of public relations in building the corporate image of an organization, using first Bank of Nigeria Plc Calabar as a study.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURES

This section reviews literature in the area of the relationship between public relation (PR) and corporate image. The existing literature in the area of PR is vast and numerous. Public relations are a promotional tool which is an element of marketing communication. Definitions of public relations are indescribable because public relation concept conveys broad spectrum of activities. The research area of public relation is vast and wide

with a number definitions regarding the term public relation and what it actuality involves. People working with public relation tend to view their activities as having a strategic impact, while many marketers view public relation as only a tactical ingredient of the promotion mix. This confusion has undermined the development of public relation and added to the blurring of what exactly includes in the area of public relation (Lages and Simkin, 2003).

A review of public relation history gives a number of definitions and approaches to the field. Hutton, (1999), in the early definitions, the dominant theme in public relation was using communications to build and hold goodwill. The term has evolved and a review of recent public relation definitions in literature and academic journals suggests a number of common themes, but there is still no true convergence. The most common components in the definition of public relation appear to be management, organization and publics. An example of a widely quoted definition is public relations is the management functions which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an organization with the public interest, and executes a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance (Hutton, 1999).

Lages and Simkin (2003) propose that public relation scholars conceptualize public relation as a management discipline, which is a change form of the traditional view of public relation as mainly a communication activity. Other authors referred by Lages and Simkin (2003) agrees with Hutton (1999) and defines public relation as “the management function that identifies,

establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationship between an organization and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends". Lages and Simkin (2003) also defined public relation as "relationship management" this means that the focus of public relations is the management of an organization's relationship with its public through the four step management process of analysis, planning, implementation and evaluation in this context public relation is used to communicate strategically.

### **CONCEPT AND MEANING OF CORPORATE IMAGE**

In marketing literature, the focus image is an external organizational aspect, emphasizing the feelings and beliefs that various external observers have about a company (Abratt and Mofokeng, 2001). Consequently, an image is formed in the minds of external observers and can be seen as a symbol of a person's perceptions of an organization. In other words image is subjective and is developed as the actors interact with the firm. In organizational theory, image is defined as how employees of an organization believe external actors perceive the organization. Dutton and Dukerich (1991), from that perspective, image is seen as an internal issue and as an expression that an organization wishes to project to certain external actors.

A firm's image is strongly linked to its vision and mission and is considered a manageable resource. Abratt and Mofokeng (2001) argue that as the vision and mission guide the company in its daily interaction with external actors, those principles will logically be reflected in the corporate image. Because the

corporate image is believed to be the visible element of a firm's image, the firm has the ability to create and manipulate a desired picture of itself in the minds of the external actors. To achieve a desired image, firm must encourage and facilitate constant two-way communication with their target audiences. Thus, firms must be fully aware of the image they are sending to both their external and internal audiences, Balmer and Stotving (1997). Image affects not only the perceptions that the external observers have of the firm but also the employee's perception of the firm Christensen and Askgaard (2001).

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF CORPORATE IMAGE**

Gregory (1991 and 1999) says every company has an image, whether planned or not and a good image can offer much to an organization's success. Ferrand and Pages (1999) believe corporate image to be of such value that it can serve to differentiate organizations that in other respects may be similar if not identical. They say image can create value and impacts on consumer behaviour but can include perceptions which may or may not reflect the objective truth. Corporate image is considered a strategic tool of great value for the financial sector, since besides helping to achieve long-term objectives Abratt and Mofokeng (2001) it can turn into a source of competitive advantage. Crooch (1999) believes that "image is everything" and Lewis (2001) says reputation is an asset of immense value that enables organizations to charge a premium for their products and services. Schroff (2002) agrees saying that a good image can compel consumers to prefer a product to a lower-priced through equally good one. Boyd (2001) says a

good corporate image contributes to improve behaviour and better attitudes on the part of its employees and Boyle (2002) says it is a treasure. Gregory (1999) contends such perceptions have an enormous impact on a company's ability to survive in the complex and competitive market place of today and Steidl and Emery (1997) says a strong positive corporate image gives an organization a long term sustainable competitive advantage.

### **Conceptual framework**

A theory is seen as the way things work, it has strong link towards guiding and directing a scholar toward a particular way. The theories that learn it support to this work include corporate social responsibility theory: this is defined as a management strategy which seeks to plan and manage an organization relationship with all those involved in, or affected by its activities. It is perhaps an excellent way to bank good will on both the external (customers) publics and internal (employees) public of an organization. First Bank of Nigeria Plc Calabar zonal headquarters is an organization whose activities directly or indirectly affect every segment of the society both government and private. Although it is not owned by the government, there is every need for it to relate also with the government because it is all over the country. Internally, the staff of the Bank should see the organization as a socially responsible place whose employers are very important. Corporate social responsibility theory emphasizes the need for incentives such that the welfare packages should be made available to the organization's publics both inwardly and outwardly from time to time.

The cumulative effect theory: This theory suggests that persuasive campaigns can be most effective when the message comes from variety of sources and is repeated from the same source but over an extended period of time. The application of the theory in public relations means that professional communicators cannot depend on one communication tactics alone to get their messages across. Rather, they should use either a combination of multiple tactics, carrying the same message or repeat the same message through one method over an extended period of time. Therefore, in the sustenance of organizational image in first Bank of Nigeria Plc Calabar, the importance of communication day-in, day-out is indispensable.

### **METHODOLOGY**

**Research design:** Considering the topic of this research work "the role of public relation in building corporate image: A study of First Bank of Nigeria Plc", the research design chosen is the survey design. The survey design is a technique used in eliciting data for analysis by administering questionnaire.

**Area of study:** This research project was conducted in first bank of Nigeria Plc, main branch and other branches scattered within Calabar metropolis. The main branch is located in the Calabar Municipality, a Local Government Area of Cross River State Nigeria. Its headquarter is in the city of Calabar. It has an area of 142km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 183,681 and the postal code of the area is 540, Calabar Municipality lies between latitude 8025E in the North.

**Instrument:** A structured effective questionnaire was developed by the researcher and used for the collection of

the data needed for the study. The questionnaire consisted of 15 questions with a few opened-ended questions and a majority of closed-ended questions. The questions were constructed in simple English to ensure clarity, unambiguity, neutrality were designed to elicit into about respondents demographic and psychographic characteristics.

**Sampling procedure:** Simple random sampling was used in the selection of the data. Denga (1998) considered that simple random sampling techniques are a means by which researchers give every member of his/her population equal and independent opportunity of being selected. The sample of this study comprised fifty (20) management staff and hundred (80) non-management staff and customers from elected branches of First Bank of Nigeria Plc, within Calabar Metropolis.

**Validity and reliability of instrument:** The first draft of the questionnaire was face validated by the researcher who, after personal scrutiny, made comments and observations after which the questionnaire was subjected to two other research experts who equally vetted to modify the instrument before they were administered to the respondents. The reliability of the instrument was established through the test-retest method using sub-scale of 20 staff outside the study and after an interval of two days, it was re-administered to the same number of staff who were not included in the study population.

**Method of data collection:** The researcher solicited permission from the authority of the bank under investigation and was granted, after which copies of the questionnaire were then distributed to the

respondents. Hundred (100) questionnaires were administered to the respondents.

**Method of data analysis:** Quantitative methods comprising simple tables, frequencies, and percentage were used in the analysis of data and interpretation of the information collected in the study. The qualitative method also assists in the explanation of complex variables.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussion of findings on the role of public relation in building corporate image are presented in the following sections:

Table 1: Roles of public relations in the building of corporate image

Item	Response*		Percentage
	Yes	No	
Does First Bank have an established Public Relations unit?	90	10	100
Has First Bank Public Relations Unit ever performed any function in building corporate image?	60	40	100
Public Relations Unit protect the image of the organization	82	18	100
Public Relations engage the media on issues regarding their organization	93	7	100

Source: Field survey, 2019 \* Multiple response

### Roles of public relations in the building of corporate image:

Table 1 presents data on the roles of public relation in building of corporate images. Respondents were probed on questions bordering on the existence of public relation unit and their functions.

Based on respondents' responses, majority agreed that there is the presence of public relation unit in First Bank PLC Calabar. This shows that the organization is interested in building a corporate image. Respondents' responses also reflected that the public relation unit is engaged in performing functions that is directed at building corporate image in the organization. These function according to respondent responses, borders around protecting the image of the organization through engaging the public through the media

and engaging the media as well. This is reflected as majority of the respondents as shown in Table 1 responded in the affirmative.

### Tools used by the Public Relations Unit in build corporate image:

Data in table 2 reflects respondents' responses on the medium or channels used by the public relation unit of Frist Bank in building corporate image. Data as shown in table 2 reveals that press releases top the ranking in the medium of public relation activities by First Bank. This is followed by social media (consisting of facebook, twitter, instagram etc.), working with the press, communicating with their staff, while dialogue ranked last, which may be the last medium the public relation unit utilizes in building corporate image of their organization.

**Table 2: Tools used by the Public Relations unit building a corporate image**

Responses	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Press Releases	49	0%
Working with the press	26	0%
Communicating with staff	12	0%
Social Media	38	0%
Dialogue	9	
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source: Field Survey 2019**

Data in the above table indicates that, all the 100 respondents representing 100% admitted that the various tools used by the Public Relations unit in building a corporate image consist on: press releases, working with the press, communicating with staff, social Media and dialogue.

### Public relation strategies used in building the image of the firm

Data in table 3 shows public relation strategies used in building the corporate

image of first bank plc calabar. The data revealed that taking cognizance and implementing the output of public relation's meeting with the management targeted at improving and building an organizations' corporate image is a vital public relation strategy as 79 percent were at the affirmative. Also, 93 percent of the respondent agreed that information dissemination is one of the strategies adopted by the public relation unit in building corporate image; subsequently, 83 and 68 percent of the

respondents both agreed that public relation and dialogue are also strategies

that can be adopted in building the corporate image of an organization.

**Table 3: Public relations strategies use in building the image of the firm (N=100)**

Responses	Yes (%)	No (%)
implementing the outcome of the public relation's meetings with the management helps in building a corporate image	79 ( 79 )	29 ( 29 )
Public relations unit is a platform for information dissemination and managing dialogue	93 ( 93 )	7 ( 7 )
Public Relations as a dependable means in building a corporate image	83 ( 83 )	17 ( 17 )
Dialogue can be used in building a corporate image	68 ( 68 )	32 ( 32 )

**Source: Field Survey 2019**

### Discussion of Findings

The role of Public Relations in a firm is to manage the flow of both internal and external communication. Public relations departments manage their organization's reputation with various groups including internal and external publics. In view of the above, analysis in table 1 reveals that the various roles of the public relations in building a corporate image in First Bank, Calabar are; communicating with the media, planning ahead and protecting the image of the firm but that the specific role of the Public Relations is to protect the image of the firm.

Data in table 1 further reveals that public relations unit has performed functions in building a corporate image in the institution as they occur. As earlier stated by Sietel (2009) that Public Relations based on two-way communications facilitated through a multimedia approach and is founded on research. This finding is a leeway to finding a lasting solution to conflict rocking most organization in recent times including protecting the image of such organization. This findings corroborates the assertion that the responsibility of the public relation unit is to carry out responsibilities such as informing and

proffering solutions to conflict that may arise in any given institution or organization. The role of public relation in building the image of an organization was put clearly by Ogunsiji (1989, p. 77) as he posits that the power and monopoly position of the media impose on them an obligation to be socially responsible, to see that all sides are fairly represented and that the public has enough information on issues concerning them in order to make informed decision.

Having an established public relations unit implies that cogent roles should be attached to the unit. In building the image of the firm, the public relations practitioners embark on series of researches, make use of the media and the internet (social media) as strategies. Data in table 3 shows that the respondents majorly admitted that the organization make use of public relations strategies in building the image of the firm by implementing the outcome of their research, using the Public Relations Unit as a platform for information dissemination and building a corporate image as the occur. According to Ushie (2002), communication which involves the transfer or transmission of some information and understanding from one person to another is one of the important

strategies in building the image of an institution. He maintained that effective communication requires continual dissemination of management's policy to the general public. Akpoyovwaire (2013) further supported the foregoing by admitting that communication is the "live-wire" of any institution and it promotes effective management practices and greater trust between management and the public.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Public relations involve creating mutual understanding between institutions, organizations and their publics. As an activity, public relations is very complex, indeed it has many components. It must be noted that successful public relations practitioners are responsible for numerous tasks on a daily basis. Whether it is relationship management, event planning, even conflict communications, or creating harmonized environment between the employees and employers, Public Relations Unit in any organization must always keep a level-head and be prepared for any situation at any given time. Public relations efforts must ensure that they must equally protect and build the image of the firm. This will help create an enabling ground for effective and mutual relationship between the staff, costumer and the general public.

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