

*Original Research Article***The Role of Public Relations in the Delivery of Forestry Services in Ghana**Kofi Ampadu Boateng¹, Petra Hlaváčková¹¹*Department of Forest and Wood Products Economics and Policy, Faculty of Forestry and Wood Technology, Mendel University in Brno, Brno, Czech Republic***Abstract**

Public Relations (PR) is a natural, vital as well as persistent component of human social relationship. It may involve a campaign designed to develop goodwill for an individual or an organisation. There are, however, few researches relating to public relations and delivery of forestry services. The aim of this study was to examine the role public relations play in the delivery of forestry services with Ghana as case study. In order to obtain the relevant information for this research, an interview schedule was developed and used to gather information from regional heads and a set of questionnaire administered to the rest of the participants through random sampling. The research further affirmed that PR increases consumer awareness and identified radio and television to be the commonest PR tools used by the Ghana Forestry Commission (GFC). The study concluded that PR to a greater extent is the foundation of an organisation and its activities influence the execution and delivery of services. GFC is, however, urged to explore other inexpensive yet effective PR tools and strategies in order to broaden their reach.

Keywords: consumer awareness; forestry; forestry services; Ghana Forestry Commission; questionnaire.

INTRODUCTION

When Hazleton and Botan (1989) published their first of two collections on Public Relations (PR) theory, their rationale was clear: PR was atheoretical. It lacked its own theory base. Unlike cognate social sciences like sociology and psychology, PR would never be taken seriously by the scholarly and academic world in its then theory-less condition.

That was then, but it is no longer the case. In the quarter century since those theory-less days, there has been a bull market for PR theories. These theories underlie the majority of research published not only in the quantitatively oriented *Journal of Public Relations Research*, but in the oldest peer-reviewed PR journal (Brown, 2014). Public relations is both old and young. It is ancient in its foundations, rooted within the earliest interactions of individuals in societies long gone. It is contemporary in its expression as one of society's emerging professions (Grunig, 2009).

Rooted in antiquity is a vital lesson for today's practitioners: what we tend to currently call PR is a necessary and natural aspect of human society (Smith, 2008). Present throughout history, it has been an essential part of societies separated by miles and centuries. Whenever we consider social interaction, we discover components of today's PR practice, thus data, persuasion, reconciliation, cooperation (Cutlip, 2013).

According to Yann (2012) around 2011/12, Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) led an international

effort to modernise the definition of public relations and replace a definition adopted in 1982 by the PRSA National Assembly (PR aids an organisation as well as its populaces familiarize reciprocally to each other). Under the "Public Relations Defined" banner, PRSA initiated a crowdsourcing campaign and public vote hence this modern definition of PR was coined: Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.

PR aids our intricate, diverse society to reach decisions and function more efficiently by contributing to reciprocal understanding among groups and organisations. It helps to bring both private and public policies into agreement. Public relations attend to a wide multiplicity of organisations in society such as businesses, government agencies, trade unions, foundations, voluntary associations, schools, hospitals and religious institutions. In order to achieve their objectives, these associations must cultivate effective relationships with several different audiences for example customers, employees, local communities, members, shareholders and other establishments as well as with the society in general. The administration of institutions ought to recognise the attitudes and principles of their societies in order to accomplish institutional objectives. These objectives themselves are moulded by the external environment. The PR practitioner serves the role of a counsellor to

management and as an intermediary, facilitating to translate private aims into rational, publicly satisfactory policy and action (Grunewald et al., 2008; Yann, 2012).

Organisations through Public Relations are able to maintain cordial relations with its public as well as increase awareness and communication. An ideal Organisation according to Heath and Coombs (2005) could be that which offers a good environment that regards the wellbeing of employees and also society in a humane and ethical manner.

Forests play a major role in the growth and development of the Ghanaian economy and the maintenance of environmental quality. There are strong religious attachments to forests; in a village in the Northern part of Ghana (Ntiama-Baidu, 1997) details a sacred province protected by traditional beliefs: the villagers' ancestors were saved from enemies when they hid in this sacred area. Now the spirits of these ancestors and gods dwell in this area. Farming is prohibited and this area is burnt once a year to protect it from accidental fires.

Forests are said to be the driving force behind Ghana's economy due to the various sectors it supports, thus ranging from agriculture, energy, tourism, infrastructure and food security (Satterthwaite et al., 2010).

Due to advances in science and technology, rapid population growth, increasing demand for forest lands for agriculture and forest products, the old forestry policy of Ghana had to be reformed. The reformation was necessary since the provisions of this policy could no longer be met (Deininger and Byerlee, 2011).

Revised in 2011, Ghana's Forest and Wildlife Policy was subsequently approved in 2012. The aim of the policy is to conserve and sustain development of forest and wildlife resources for the maintenance of environmental stability and uninterrupted flow of optimal benefits from the socio-cultural and economic goods as well as services that the forest environment offers to the present and future generations and importantly fulfilling Ghana's commitments under international agreements and conventions (Ankomah, 2012).

The image of an organisation is vital to its employees, public and other related stakeholders (Gray and Balmer, 1998). However, due to corruption in Ghana's public institutions and ineffective PR strategy, the image of these institutions is nothing to write home about. As a result of pressure from the media and other organisations, government-owned corporations are opened to public scrutiny. This shows the level of interest by the public in organisational behaviour which demands a vibrant and effective PR.

Objectives of Public Relations

As different parts of marketing campaigns, public relation represent a means to address several broad objectives including:

Building Product Awareness – During the introduction of a new product or relaunching an existing product, advertisers can utilize a PR component that creates consumer attention and awareness through media placements and special events. **Instigating Interest** – Whether a PR situation is a short item article or is incorporated with different items in “round up” article, stories in the media can allure a gathering of people to attempt the item. For instance, around the Christmas season, a unique holiday food may be promoted with PR through promotional releases sent to the food media or through exceptional occasions that sample the product or item. **Provision of Information** – PR can be utilized to provide customers with additional in depth information about products and services. Through articles, newsletters, collateral materials and through online sources, PR conveys data to clients that can offer them some assistance with gaining understanding of the service or product being offered. **Invigorating Demand** – A positive news article in a daily paper, on a television news show or appearance on the Internet, regularly brings about a detectable increase in product sales and services. **Reinforcing the Brand** – In numerous organizations the public relations function is likewise included with brand reinforcement by keeping up positive with key audiences and accordingly supporting in building a strong image. Presently, it is ever more vital for organizations and brands to build a good image. A strong image offers the organization some assistance with building its business and it can help the organization in times of crisis as well (Hon, 1998).

Ethical Communication

Questions of right and wrong come up every time people communicate. Fundamental to responsible thinking, ethical communication is decision making and the improvement of relationships and societies within and across contexts, channels, cultures and media. Additionally, ethical communication improves human worth as well as dignity by nurturing truthfulness, responsibility, personal integrity, fairness and respect for one's self and others (Neher and Sandin, 2015).

Waluchow (2003) states with regards to judgments of values that it is not assessments of what we should do, but about what things or properties are good and have value. Companies are occasionally compared with individuals for the reason that a great organisation operates like a moral agent that could be held responsible for their activities; however, organisational ethics focuses on the choices of the individual and

the organisation (Shockley-Zalabak, 2011; Griffin and McClish, 2011).

Advertisement

Productive advertising and promotion of goods and services need a strong expertise in customers, competitors and collaborators as well as excellent ability in providing viable needs of customers (Miller, 1986).

According to Richards (2000) creativity without strategy is called art. Creativity with strategy is called advertising. This notion suggests both PR and advertising are strategic in their delivery, they are not the same thing even though there are shared similarities.

Advertising is an attempt to persuade consumers to buy their products or services by highlighting the benefits and showcasing the attributes. Public relations, on the other hand, uses several tools and methods such as events or press releases to create awareness and build a positive image of a company or organisation (Belch and Belch, 2003).

Marketing

Marketing is the intermediary between the consumer and the business. The marketing department strives to profoundly understand the customer to develop a product or service which the consumer will want. Once that information is gathered, that information is transferred to the business, which in turn produces a product according to those specifications (Bailey and Bakos, 1997; Pantoomano-Pfirsch and Kittima, 2015).

Marketing comprises of two main aims; the first is to attract new customers by emphasising on the prospective value a good or service offers a consumer. The second aim is to retain customers by continually meeting and surpassing the customer's satisfaction with the product. Researchers have found that often as much as 80% of a company's revenue accrues from as few as 20% of a company's repeat customers. This undoubtedly strengthens the argument for an effective marketing plan (Moore and Pareek, 2009).

Cohen (2012) describes marketing and public relations as that of a love-hate relationship. While the American Marketing Association (AMA) Board of Directors defines marketing as the activity, set of institutions and processes for creating, communicating, delivering and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners as well as the society at large. While both marketing and PR are at their best when used together, many professionals feel the need to choose one or the other.

The principal aim of this research was to ascertain the effects associated with the delivery regarding forestry products and services in Ghana based on the Forestry Commission's operations.

Statement of the Problem

It is prominent these days that role of foresters has changed with time, their job span across many responsibilities including public relations (Keller et al., 2011). In Ghana the absence of a vibrant and effective public relations has tainted the image of forestry in the country. It is interesting to note that many institutions and organisations are beginning to realise the importance of PR in their operations and hence developing the department.

There is a constant rising demand for forestry products globally; this has led to illegal and unsustainable forestry practice worldwide (Meyfroidt and Lambin, 2011). There is therefore an urgent need to address these issues through an effective PR system. There must be a collective effort of government and organisations to bring an end to this challenge through strict monitoring measures, enforcing of forestry laws and an effective public relations.

Specific Objectives

- To determine an effective PR strategy for the Ghana Forestry Commission.
- To determine the effects associated with Public Relations in institutional support in Ghana.
- To assess the effects of Public Relations delivery of information associated with Forestry and Forestry products.
- To examine the way Public Relation impacts on the creation of product or service awareness in Ghana.

Effective PR needs information, dependent on evaluation and understanding, of all the elements that affect public behaviour towards the organisation (Ledingham, 2003).

As advocates and counsellors, public relations professionals serve diverse special interest of business, non-profits and governments. As professionals, they also are bound to serve the public interest. These dual commitments, which more often than not require cautious balancing of contending interests, have sparked considerable debate among scholars and practitioners over the core function and fundamental values of public relations. Although some have shied away from the term 'advocate' in referring to the work of public relation professionals – preferring 'consensus builder' to be a better depiction of the role of public relations in present-day society – the majority of practitioners seem to have embraced advocacy as a primary function (Fitzpatrick and Bronstein, 2006).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A set of questionnaires was administered on a cross section of members of communities mainly in the middle belt of Ghana (Ashanti, Brong-Ahafo, Eastern and Western Regions). These regions were

chosen for this study due to their relatively higher forest cover compared to other regions in the country. The respondents were selected systematically from every third household within the research area. At the preliminary stage 200 questionnaires were targeted to be administered. Nevertheless, during the questionnaire administration a section of the community members declared their unwillingness to participate and hence declined. Therefore a total of 175 questionnaires were sampled at the end of the research period, representing a 87.5% response rate. The entire fieldwork was structured to last for about two months. However, it took three months before the necessary data were collected, thus from September to November 2015. Information from the questionnaires was adapted to a Statistical Programme for Social Sciences (SPSS) as well as Microsoft Excel format. Both open and closed answer questions were categorised and coded. Frequencies were derived from the coded categories that were computed and these are presented in the form of figures (bar, Likert and pie chart). These are further described according to the results and along the stated objectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Does PR develop or build product or service awareness?

The research sought to uncover whether PR creates product or service awareness that enhances the delivery of forestry services. The results were presented on a pie chart. The research indicated

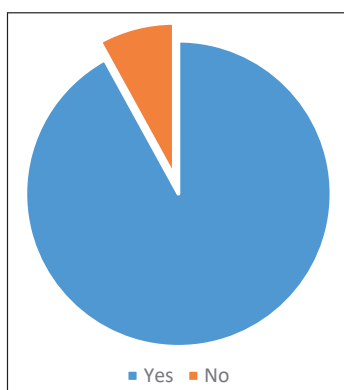


Figure 1. PR Builds Consumer Awareness

that 92% of the respondents agreed that PR has a significant function in an organisation by building brand awareness, whereas 8% were in disagreement of the statement. This is a strong indication that PR is an effective tool and should be capitalised by the Ghana Forestry Commission in their bid to improve the delivery of forestry services.

The duties of a PR in recent times have widened; incorporating additional duties like constant market monitoring, promptly and effectively managing crisis when they arise within the organisation as well as search engine optimisation.

Does the Ghana forestry commission PR strategy focus on consumer awareness?

The study meant to ascertain whether the Ghana Forestry Commission PR strategy focused on consumer awareness. This was interpreted using a 5 point Likert scale and the results were shocking. Although the majority of respondents agreed the PR strategy of the GFC focused on consumer awareness, there were significant numbers who taugth otherwise. On the stack bar chart 31% strongly agreed, 23% agreed, 20% disagreed, 8% strongly disagreed and 18% were undecided. In order to build consumer awareness, there is a need to target the desired consumer base, then the organisation can easily assess measures to be taken in order to increase consumer awareness.

Media instruments used in PR campaigns

A column chart was used to interpret the results. The outcome showed 36% of the respondents identified radio as a media tool employed by the GFC in promoting brand awareness, 28% identified television, 14% identified public newspapers and 24% identified the internet. The results pointed out that newspaper and the internet was less often used. To make PR more effective there is an urgent need for the GFC to explore the services of more PR tools for example social media which has proven quite effective in recent times. Media tours, speaking engagements, newsletters and sponsorships are all effective PR tools which could be used by the GFC in order to further improve the image of the commission.

Quality of services rendered

The respondents were asked to answer yes or no if they believed the existing promotion strategy by the GFC conveys the quality of services. The results were interpreted by a bar chart. The evidence showed 67% agreed, while 33% disagreed. Inferring from the results obtained, it can be deduced that advertising plan adopted by GFC informs the public about qualities and values of service delivery. The department of PR at the GFC in recent times have been working tirelessly to improve on the image of the organisation as well as educating the public especially in the rural areas. This progress of service reach is as a result of rigorous media campaign and participation by the GFC. However, there could be an improvement by adding other known effective PR tools.

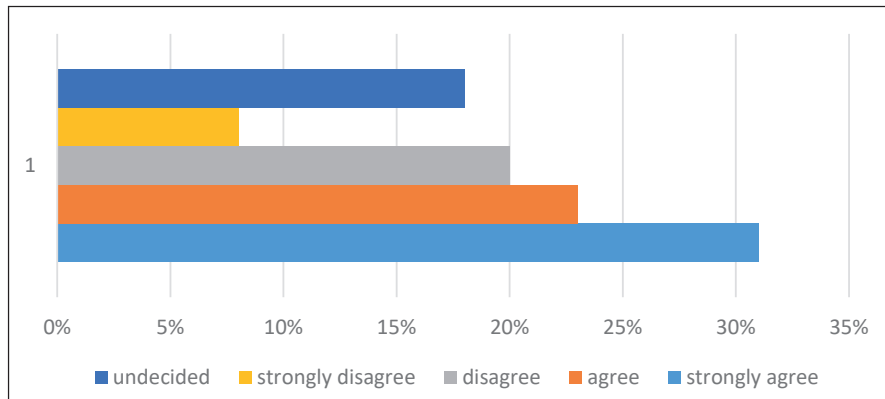


Figure 2. PR Strategy focuses on consumer awareness

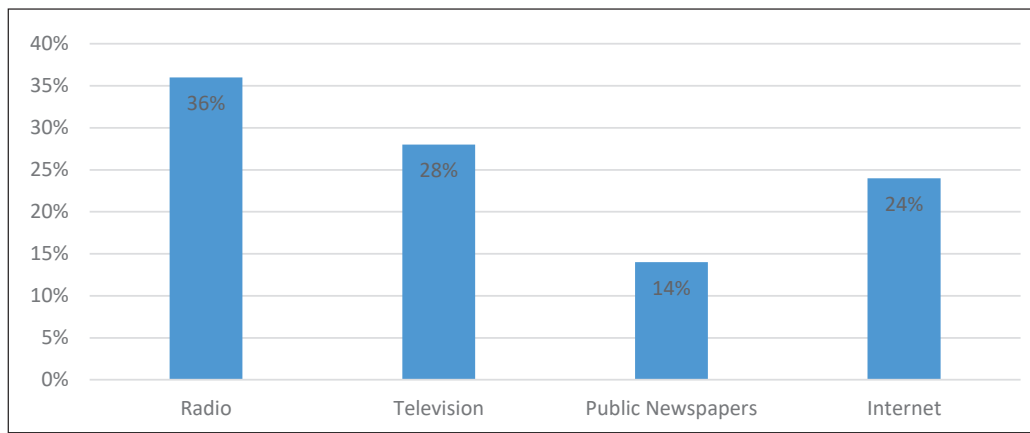


Figure 3. Proportion of media instruments used

Means of communication

Respondents were to give any means of communication used by the GFC in the relay of information to the public. The final results revealed that 33% of the respondents identified radio as a means of information transfer, 29% identified television, 10% identified public newspapers, 16% identified internet and 12% indicated that village and community broadcast vehicles has had an immense improvement in the dissemination of information. There is little control over how the media presents information to

the public. The media are not obliged to cover events or publish your press releases just because you sent them something. There is therefore the need to go the extra mile and not completely rely on the services of the media alone.

Knowledge about Ghana Forestry Commission.

On the knowledge about GFC, respondents were to tick as it applied to them. The outcome was then represented on a circle graph. The evidence indicated that 59% knew GFC very well, 27% pretty well, 9% knew GFC a little, and 3.5% said they only heard the name but

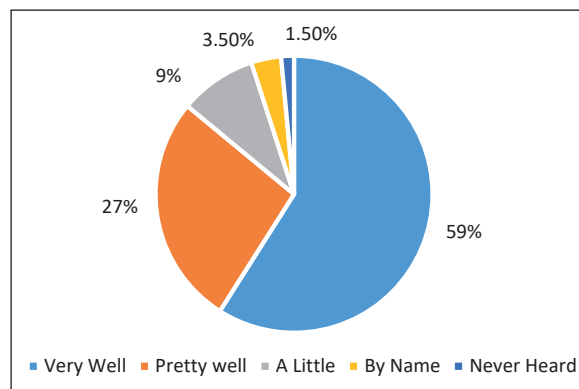


Figure 4. Level of GFC Knowledge

did not have any insight about GFC. Another 1.5% had never heard of GFC.

One should gauge level of awareness in advance of the PR programme so that awareness levels after the programme can be compared to that baseline. Public relations is arguably more powerful in building awareness than any other form of marketing communication and so building awareness is commonly found among public relations objectives (Weiner, 2006).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Inferring from the findings, the study concluded that PR to a greater extent is the foundation of an organisation and its activities influences the execution and delivery of services.

The findings show PR does build product awareness, provide information of services of an organization, reinforce brand of an organization and create interest of services of an organization hence PR absolutely influences the delivery of services. It is therefore vital to effectively engage these activities at equal measure in an organization in the event that we need to realize the set objectives and promote the organization's values.

In line with the findings, the following recommendations were made: PR focus on service awareness; GFC ought to be commended in this area and urged to focus more attention to its staff, clients and partners on the role of PR in the organisation. This is a strong indication that PR is an effective tool and should be capitalised by the Ghana Forestry Commission in their bid to improve the delivery of forestry services.

PR strategy focus on consumer awareness; Although the majority of respondents agreed the PR strategy of the GFC focused on consumer awareness, there were still some significant number of respondents who taught otherwise. There is therefore the need for the GFC to target the desired section of the populace and then adopt measures that can easily be taken in order to increase public awareness.

Media Instruments used in PR campaigns; GFC ought to adopt media vehicles like internet and newspapers as they are progressively getting to be famous particularly with the changing patterns in communication. Media tours, speaking engagements, newsletters and sponsorships are all effective PR tools which could be used by the GFC in order to further improve the image of the commission.

Quality of service rendered; GFC's PR strategy should guarantee that the advertising plan captures the best qualities and values of its services. This is essential because a fraction of the respondents were of the view that GFC has not captured the qualities and services rendered to the public. Knowledge about Ghana forestry commission; a lot more could

be done to raise public awareness on the role and relevance of the commission. GFC ought to bolster marketing, advertising, research and communication ethics to improve a positive relationship and continue propelling the image of the commission.

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