

PUBLIC RELATIONS AS A PROFESSION: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

Public relations practice strives to strike a balance in perception between an organization and its audiences or publics. Its major concern is the acceptability of the organization, its leadership, policies and products by the public. This study examines the development of public relations as a noble profession. The practice deals much with communications and influence in its engagements. The study is based on the Four-Way Models Theory of public relations developed by James Grunig and Todd Hunt in 1984. The theory provides an understanding of the various approaches to effective communication and how they affect the reputation as well as the relationships of an organization with its stakeholders. This theory, among others, is the result of persistent efforts by scholars and practitioners to standardize the public relations practice, first as a profession, and second, as an academic discipline. The study is a qualitative study based on the secondary sources of data. One of the findings of the study is that public relations practice started from the efforts of individuals whose efforts were geared toward the protection of the public image of leaders and organizations, their policies and products for the interest of stakeholders and the general public. Thus, the steady expansion of the profession up to the present age is the result of consistent collaborations by several practitioners in different climes over the years. Yet, in spite of the great feats already achieved by public relations as an evolving profession, the study concludes that public relations still faces many challenges, especially in this digitalized age of communication.

Keywords: *Public Relations; Propaganda; Communications; Organizational Interests; Professionalism*

Introduction

Businesses are created for profit, though there are organizations that operate businesses without the intent to make profits. These are charity or non-profit organizations. Governments operate administrative businesses that provide people's needs daily without directly asking them to pay. It is assumed payments are made to the government through the taxes imposed on all taxable adults in the state. In all these, few things are important if these groups must succeed in their set goals. They need to remain acceptable to the people who receive their services; they must be seen to be enjoying the people's confidence; and their products must always serve the purpose which the producer said they are to serve.

Since the ancient times these challenges have confronted governments and organizations that operate to satisfy public needs. Kings of old desired to be applauded and honoured as good rulers. Companies and non-profit groups design and manage several means to remain in the good books of the public, and for their products to continue commanding respect in the markets. However, neither the rulers nor the managers of both business companies and non-profit organizations have the know-how to sustain the needed good will to sell themselves, their policies and products to the public. Public relations come in handy to save the king and politicians from ill public opinions, to keep business organizations and their products acceptable to the consumers, and to properly educate the public on the ideals of non-profit groups.

Powell (2021) sees public relations as "the strategic practice of managing relationships between an organization and its key public to earn positive exposure, influence, and reputation." This applies well to political leadership and non-profit organizations desirous of acceptability and continuous relevance in their services. The major target of public relations is to build and maintain healthy relationships between an organization and its publics. It pursues and attains that through media relations, crisis management, thought leadership, and brand building.

Although the traditional print and broadcast methods remain relevant in public relations, evolution of digital channels such as the social media and online news platforms, have become the fastest channels in reaching key audiences in today's mass communication practices. Nonetheless, good knowledge of both the traditional and digital communication strategies is best for successful public relations. When public relations are properly done, a lot can be achieved for a group. It can be a cost-effective way of raising the profile of an organization.

While taking a message about a group to a wider audience, public relations improves the reputation of that group as well. Public relations have always been involved in informing the public, persuading and integrating people. This was found to be true with the message on clay tablet in ancient Iraq which promoted the agric techniques of the people. That message was known to have conveyed the first public relations information in history.

Then in ancient Babylon, Egypt and Persia, kings used monuments like pyramids, Obelisks, and other statues to promote their rule. Magicians and religious activities were equally used to persuade people to accept that the kings possessed divine rights to rule. In many instances, court advisers persuaded the rulers to talk to the people honestly while scribes documented the deeds of the kings for public consumption. In other ancient countries such as Greece and Rome, and early England and other regions, persuasion was a key in public businesses. It is the art of those persuasions that eventually culminated into the profession of public relations.

In both the early times and now, the effective use of carefully selected words to achieve set objectives has been the only acceptable means that advances public relations. Public relations executives are better trained today in the art of effective use of words for better services to their clients than in the early days of the profession when practitioners were openly accused of lying and short charging the public on behalf of their clients. Today public relations have grown, and have evidently become a noble profession throughout the world.

This profits the profession in some ways such that corporations, institutions and even the public look on to public relations to gain exposure, influence and reputation. With the coming of the digital communication, public relations have constantly remained an evolving profession that takes on new forms and strategies to meet the currency of the times. This is largely achieved, according to Powell (2021), through media relations, brand building and crisis management.

Media relations are the relationship a business organization or institution builds, nurtures and sustains through the press. This relationship is imperative if the image of the group and its products are to remain acceptable and respected in the public domain. Today competition is high and intense among many business groups in the market place. Companies using public relations strategies would surely raise awareness of their brands and increase recognition of their names.

Public relations also enable a company/institution to manage crises that are threatening its relationship with employees, government and other stakeholders.

Public relations, to satisfy those that sponsor it, make use of lobby groups to influence government policies or corporate bodies or the opinion of the public. A greater percentage of the population in every society is always governed by an insignificant percentage. This small number of people possesses the power to take decisions that directly affect the majority members of the society. It is to sway those decisions to their advantages that organizations and individuals hire public relations professionals who hide their true motives and engage in lobbying to influence the decision makers for the sponsors. According to Oakes (2010), politicians and other public personalities very often engage public relations experts to showcase their views, reputation and policies to the general public. In a nutshell, public relations practice is after the cordial relationship that its principals enjoy from stakeholders as well as the positive results which come from that. Thus, because of its relevance to the society, public relations has now assumed such a public importance that no segment of the society can actually survive without its services.

The Concept of Public Relations

Till date there has been no universally accepted definition of public relations. Scholars defer in their perceptions of the term even though they agree on the functions of the profession. Many scholars like Macnamara (2012), tried to compare public relations with diplomacy but found that they had different theoretical bases. Basically, public relations deal with the business interests of organizations and governments, especially at the domestic levels.

Looking at public relations as the total communications of any organization or person who had to communicate with others, Jefkins (1987) accepted as appropriate the definition of the British Institute of Public Relations that says public relations was “the effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its publics.” Viewing the profession through a diplomatic lens, L’Etang (1996) shares three overlaps in the functions of diplomacy and public relations --- representational (rhetoric, oratory, advocacy), dialogic (negotiation, peace-making), and advisory (counseling). He concluded that public relations and diplomacy have some common grounds in interpretative and presentational roles where both try to manage communication on issues of importance.

Signitzer and Wamser (2006), saw public relations as the strategic communication functions which organizations or nation-states typically deal with to influence the opinion of stakeholders. Entman (2008) revealed that in the organized attempts of a government to influence the framing of its policy in foreign media, there was a cross-fertilization of public relations ideas which help in building a better nation through active engagements, empathy and effective communication. And in the words of Grunig and Hunt (1984), public relations taken separately, is the practice of managing and disseminating information from an individual or an organization (like a business, government agency or non-profit organization) to the public so as to influence their perception. They observed a distinction between public relations and publicity, arguing that while public relations is internally controlled, publicity is drawn from the perception of external parties. Public relations aim at informing the various publics, including customers, investors, partners, employees, and other stakeholders. It persuades all these groups to maintain favourable view about an organization, its leadership, products, or political decisions of a government. These are achieved by creating and maintaining good relationships with an organization's target audience, the media, relevant trade media, and other opinion leaders.

Success in public relations, according to Roos (n.d), calls for deep understanding of the interests and concerns of each of the organization's many stakeholders. The public relations executive must know how to effectively address those concerns using publicity, the most powerful tool of public relations trade. Breakeuridge (2008) held the view that Ivy Lee's definition of public relations as a management function which tabulates public attitude, defines the policies, procedures and interests of organizations, and executes a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance, was the result of the unavoidable role of the public relations practitioner.

Theoretical Framework

Effective public relations practice is based on some theories that explain the best approaches to optimal results in the modern times. These theories were developed by experts who were keen in finding an answer to the challenges facing public relations in the early days. From the days of Phineas Taylor Barnum, a popular American show-man who believed that 'there was no bad publicity,' to the days of Ivy Lee, another American who encouraged private business organizations through publicity according to Diggs-Brown (2011), many questions have been raised about publicity as public relations. These questions attracted academics

who went into research to find out what public relations should actually involve. Though Ivy Lee had published his *Declaration of Principles* in 1906, it was Edward Barnays who was the first theorist in the profession of public relations. Barnays posited that audiences should be carefully understood and then persuaded to see things from the perspective of organizations/clients. He wrote the first textbook in public relations and was the first to teach it as a course of study in a university, the New York University, in 1923.

Another early contributor was Walter Lippman who coined the term “manufacture of consent” to express his opinion on seeking public consent to support a democratic society. He wrote many books on public relations, including *Public Opinion* (1922) and *Phantom Public* (1925). Next on the line was Basil Clarke, a journalist, who was reputed for introducing public relations in the United Kingdom with his establishment of the Editorial Services in 1924. Clarke held the opinion that public relations must look true, complete and candid or its credit was gone. According to Watson (2018), Clarke held dear the opinion that facts selected for dissemination in public relations campaigns could be used in persuading audiences.

During the First World War introduced propaganda was introduced into public relations to sway public opinions. Goldman (1948) saw that as leading to a shift in factual arguments in public relations theories to emotional appeals and the psychology of crowd. Governments of different nations engaged in propaganda as a concept to persuade people to support them and to see reasons to condemn their enemies as the aggressors.

From these early days, different views have emerged in the search for an appropriate theory of public relations as a profession. Among the many theories that evolved, the present study is based on the Four-Way Models of public relations theory propounded by James Grunig and Todd Hunt in 1984. The models include: Press agency model, Public information model, Two-way Asymmetrical model, and Two-way Symmetrical model. According to Grunig and Hunt these models, especially the two-way symmetrical model, are the most effective way to practice public relations because they are the testable variables to measure the quality of organizational relationships.

The press agency model or publicity which came up in the late 19th Century, according to Grunig and Hunt, focuses on the power of persuasion to manipulate public opinion. As noted earlier, the publicity model was associated with Phineas

Taylor Barnum, an American show-man who used flamboyance to sway the opinion of his audience. Ivy Lee, an American publicist, also was noted to have used publicity in the service of private business organizations. Today, the publicity model is always linked with publicity stunts, press tours and exaggerated statements about a product or an event. These are often seen as self-serving approaches because they do not reflect the actual ethical values or commitment of an organization.

The public information model focuses on the dissemination of accurate and objective information to the public. The model is often associated with the works of Ivy Lee who tried to foster trust and credibility with key stakeholders. Organizations that depend on this model are keen on providing comprehensive and unbiased information to their stakeholders. This enables the stakeholders to form their individual opinions based on the facts made available to them. But the model remains a one-way communication approach whose effectiveness is limited to the involvement of the views and feedbacks of the audience.

The two-way asymmetrical model makes use of persuasion and feedback to improve communication between an organization and its stakeholders. The model became popular in the mid-20th Century, and depends on critical studies and understanding of the target audience to comprehend messages with their values and preferences. The purpose is to influence public opinion while at the same time taking account of the feedback of the audience. However, even though the model allows audience engagement, the objectives of the organization over the needs and concerns of the stakeholders remain its priority.

The two-way symmetrical model pursues an open and transparent communication whereby the organization and its stakeholders involve in dialogue for better understanding of each other's views, values and concerns. It is the most ethical and practical approach to public relations because it recognizes the importance of building relationships of mutual benefits with stakeholders. This balance between all parties encourages collaboration, trust and the building of long term relationship. Thus, the model is the standard approach for both interconnected and globalized public relations practices.

Conclusively, it is advisable that organizations should evolve an approach that joins the elements of each of the four-way models to maximize the effectiveness of their public relations strategies. This will enable the organizations to contain the many fluctuating needs of stakeholders while at the same time maintaining

their commitment to transparent and sincere communication. The Grunig and Hunt theory provides an understanding of several approaches to communication, and how they affect the reputation and relationships of an organization. By recognizing the strengths and limitations of each of the four-way models of public relations, organizations are in a better position to take informed decisions about the right strategies for their unique circumstances. On the whole, this fosters a practice of openness, collaboration and mutual understanding with stakeholders, influencers and other publics.

Evolution of Public Relations

Public relations are believed to be as old as the human society since people have always related with themselves for one reason or the other. But there was a time when those relationships grew spectacularly that the job of public relations was seen as exclusive to the practitioners. That rapid rise of the profession started in the ancient times when individuals accepted to launder the image of Kings as well as their Kingdoms.

In the early days of public relations, its three cardinal elements of informing, persuading and integrating of people, were as relevant as they are today. As noted by Baker and Angelopulo (2013), the first known step in the development of public relations was a clay tablet in ancient Iraq which promoted the agricultural techniques of the people. Again, leaders in ancient Babylon, Egypt and Persia were known to have built monuments like pyramids, obelisks, and statues, which promoted their divine rights to rule. Magicians and religious activities were also used to persuade people to accept that kings and pharaohs had divine rights to rule. While in Egypt, the duty of court advisers was to persuade the pharaoh to speak honestly to the people, temple scribes documented the deeds of the pharaoh for public consumption. (Smith, 2018; Adolf and Tirrand, 2003) Also in ancient Greece, there was a group of rhetoric public persuaders called sophists classified by Isocrates, Plato and Aristotle as dishonest and misleading lot. But Richard and Vibbert (1986) described them as ethical lot using the persuasive principles to do jobs they were hired to do.

In ancient Rome, Julius Caesar was known to have promoted his military successes and political position with his first campaign biography, news-letters and poems. And in medieval Europe, craftsmen formed guilds to manage their collective image and interests. In England, Smith (2004) stated that Lord Chancellors were used as peace mediators between rulers and the ruled. Given

that the task of the public relations executive is to defend corporate interests against sensational and hyper-critical news articles, those Lord Chancellors were actually engaging in real public relations tasks to defend the public image of their kings.

In November, 1905, Pope Urban pleaded that the Christian world, especially in Europe, should take up arms and assist the Byzantines recapture the Holy Land (Jerusalem) from Muslim invaders. His appeal has become recognized as a public relations outing. (Smith, 2004; L'Etang, 2012) In about 1215 A.D., while King John of England fought his barons and the church, Stephen Langton persisted in persuading the barons to insist that the king must recognize the authority of the church. Langton's persistent persuasion contributed to the king signing the Magna Carta (the Great Charter) which demanded that the king must rule by law and not by his will. On January, 1622, Pope Gregory XV started the "Congregatio de Fide" (Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples) for the unification of Christians and the spread of the Christian faith all over the world. According to Garth, S.J. and O'Donnell, V. (2011) the Pope was engaging in a sincere persuasive (public relations) activity.

It was not until the Second World War when governments introduced public relations as propaganda in their military quests that public relations profession began to be addressed as negative.(Pleissis, 2001) Nonetheless, before then Ivy Lee had led some American journalists to form the first public relations agency, the Publicity Bureau, in Boston in 1906. Pleissis (2001), Barbara (2011) and O'Brien (2005) affirmed Lee's Declaration of Principles was the first introduction of the profession. They maintained that the declaration stipulated that "public relations work must be done in the open, should be accurate and should cover topics of public interest." As early as 1948 Eric Goldman, a historian, had noted that Lee's declaration of principles marked the beginning of an emphasis on informing, rather than misleading, the public.

Lee was also said to have developed the modern press release and the two-way-street philosophy of both listening to and communicating with the public. (Levy,2006). But Hallahan (2002) opined that Lee's work was often criticized as spin or propaganda, especially after he tried to exonerate the Rockefeller family and their mining interests from the 1913 Ludlow Massacre in which striking miners and their families were killed by state militia men.

From 1917, companies began to set their own publicity campaigns to counter perceived public errors about them. Edward Barnays, influenced by Sigmund Freud, was the first theorist in public relations in his work that adopted the approach that audiences should be understood carefully and persuaded to see things from the client's perspective. (Ali, 2005) Barnays was equally credited with writing the first textbook on public relations which he taught as an academic discipline at New York University in 1923.

Following Sigmund Freud's theories about the subconscious, Barnays saw public relations as an applied social science that uses insights from psychology, sociology, and other disciplines to scientifically manage and manipulate the thinking and behavior of irrational and herd-like public.

Development of Public Relations as a Profession

Eric Goldman (1948) observed that public relations had become a Course of study in the universities and was already developing into a profession in the 1940s, accepted in similar ways as lawyers, doctors, and other professionals but that it failed to reach equal reputation as other professions because of a history of deceit. Olasky (1987) agreed with Goldman. But Heath (1991), a Houston University don, saw the profession then as evolving toward "true professional status," even though he seemed to counter that stand when he accepted that despite the field's new found professionalism and ethics, its reputation was still influenced by a history of exploitive behavior. J.A.R. Pimlott, another university teacher, in Heath, et al (2009), affirmed that public relations had attained a "quasi professionalism" status.

In those turbulent days of the profession, a good number of media outlets had emerged, and the profession itself was detached from wartime propaganda to suit the interests of the private sector. Public relations had become a common factor in politics, social activism and corporate enterprises to the extent that the press became a real-time outlet which heightened questions about public relations and its clients. The profession began its growth into a professional field in the United States of America in 1947 when the Public Relations Society of America, PRSA, was formed. Heath (2006) held that the formation of PRSA was made possible through the establishment of trade associations, PR news-magazines, international public relations agencies, and academic principles for the profession. In the United Kingdom, the Institute of Public Relations was created in 1948, and later became the Chartered Institute of Public Relations in London.

By November, 1949, the first conference to establish a concept for an international public relations association was held in London between two Dutch and four British public relations practitioners. Their target was how to organize public relations professionals all over the world into a transnational society with the view of raising the standards of the profession and improving the quality and efficiency of practitioners. The International Public Relations Association (IPRA) was born in 1955. But in 1949, J.H. Brebner had published his book, *Public Relations and Publicity*, the first public relations book in Britain, where he laid down his definition and guides to a successful public relations and publicity engagements. In 1956, the Public Relations Society of America established the Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education to provide further guidance and re-training for practitioners with Pendleton Dudley as the first Chairman. In 2016, the PRSA went into a 3-year partnership with the Institute of Public Relations, IPR, to examine gaps in the expectations and skills for new professionals, while encouraging the industry at large to support its up-and-coming talents.

As a further boost to professionalizing public relations, some practitioners formed the International Association of Business Communicators in 1970. Heath (2010) said that the founding of the Foundation for Research and Education merged totally with the Institute of Public Relations in 1989 at the Weimer Hall in Gainesville, University of Florida, USA. But as far as the 1950s when public relations was still developing in the Americas, Daniel Edelman, a media guru, had organized the first media tour of America with his “Toni Twins” which promoted professional salon and home care products. Edelman’s tour gave birth to the world’s two largest public relations firms, “Edelman” created in 1952 and “Burson-Marsteller,” created in 1953. Lattimore, et al, (2011) maintained that this period saw the establishment of trade publications and magazines such as PR Week, Ragans, PR News, and others, by different individual practitioners.

Public relations went international from USA when John Hill skillfully established Hill and Knowlton Company between the 1960s and 1970s with an international office in London. (Trevor and Simon, 2011) John Edelman’s companies, Edelman and Burson-Marsteller, also established offices London within the same period and a competition which raised the international scope of public relations ensued between the two PR giants who explored Asia, Europe, and other regions. In line with the professional development of public relations, companies in the US, UK and France were encouraged to use public relations to promote their operations through the persuasive efforts of Jacques Coup de Frejac.

In early 2000, public relations developed rapidly into a profession in Latin America, the same way it developed within the industrialized nations. Latimore, et al (2011) said that public relations started gradually as a profession, from a series of press agents and got into some theoretical approaches and practice in the 1980s when research works in the profession appeared in academic journals like *Public Relations Review* and the *Journal of Public Relations Research*. Such publications gave birth to the industrial understanding that identified Research, Planning, Communication and Action, as key steps in the process of developing the practice into a respected profession.

In Nigeria, public relations developed into a profession through a gradual process. From the days of nationalist struggle, nearly all the Western means and methods of publicity were extensively used by the nationalists to force the British colonial masters out. They printed handbills, Fliers, Posters, Newsletters, Pamphlets, Newspapers and Press Releases, and even involved propaganda to incite Nigerians to stand against the colonial masters, painted as the oppressors of the people. The nationalists succeeded in galvanizing the diversities of the country to build a united front which eventually saw the colonial masters relinquishing political power to the nationalists.

It was from the success recorded through the use of the different publicity tools that the early practitioners used in establishing public relations as a profession in Nigeria. From only seven members in 1963 who dared the odds of the time, veterans like Dr. Sam Epelle, Alex Nwokedi, Aduke Alakija, Theo Awobogu, Kunle Ojora, Wilton High and Dan Agbakova, created the Public Relations Association of Nigeria (PRAN). Dr. Sam Epelle was the first president of the group. He led it for nine years before Kanu Offonry succeeded him in 1968. It was under Kanu Offonry that the Association was changed to Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) in 1972. Tony Willie Harry was the third president of the Institute. He took over from Kanu Offonry in 1972 and reigned till 1976. Ikhaz Yakubu took over in 1976 and stayed in office till 1980. Bob Ogbuagu became President of NIPR in 1980 and reigned till 1984 before Alex Akinyele succeeded him. Akinyele reigned till 1988. He was succeeded by Mike Okereke who remained President of the Institute till 1993. Under Okereke, NIPR was chartered on June 1, 1990, under Decree No. 16 (which became an Act of the National Assembly).

Other presidents of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations till date include: Sabo Mohammed (1993 – 1998), Jibade Onyekan (1998 – 2001); Senebo Bobo

Brown (2001 – 2005); Ike Nwosu (2005 – 2009); Mohammed A. Abdullahi (2009 – 2013); Rotimi Oladele (2013 – 2018); Muktar Sirajo (2018 – 2021); Ike Neliaku (2023 till date).

Decree 16 (now an Act) which chartered the NIPR empowered it to monitor the professional conducts of members through a Code of Ethics and Professional Conducts. The Institute now admits prospective members with standard academic qualification, preferably a first degree or OND/HND in Mass Communication, Communication Studies, Public Relations, et cetera. The Institute is governed by a 22-member Governing Council made up of 17 elected members and 5 others nominated by the Federal Government. The election of Council members is held every two years. Out of the 22 Council members, an electoral college formed by the Council, elects the President and Vice President who are then after referred to as the Chairman and Vice Chairman. The Council also appoints a Registrar who, according to the Council rules, prepares and maintains a membership register for the Institute.

Challenges and Prospects of Public Relations

In all professions, there are challenges that affect the operations of practitioners. Public relations as a service profession, depends much on collaborations with third parties to attain its concerns of building the reputation of clients. In doing that it strives to shape public perceptions in order to raise the trust of stakeholders in the policies and products of its clients. That effort comes with the challenges that the personal image of the practitioner must not be soiled.

As a management function that evaluates public attitudes, identifies policies and procedures of organizations with the interest of the public at the fore burner, public relations carries out a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance. And as a global discipline, public relations engage in operations that are relevant to institutions employing it. Ajihson (2017) notes that in his effort to serve the interests of the client and its audience at the same time, the PR practitioner is faced with the challenge of acceptance. The practitioner struggles in-between his client and the stakeholders to be recognized as an honest carrier of productive ideas or messages and as a practitioner whose words could be trusted.

This is because there is no guarantee that good communication alone can translate to public acceptance of the opinion of an organization. That, according to Torossian (2021), is because public relations strategies do not always work out as

strategized, leading to poor returns on investment (ROI), especially when public relations stories are not published by the particular media chosen by the public relations client. Ajihson (2017) observed that limited financing was responsible for this because organizations always believe in cutting down their public relations budgets while expecting highest results from the practitioner. In that unfortunate circumstance, the practitioner is forced to reduce the scope of his media campaigns to achieve possible optimum results.

Another challenge is the avalanche of communication platforms made possible by social media outfits which ask for mere subscriptions from the public for press services. In this digitalized communication revolution the public relations practitioner is caught in doubt about which right medium to use in reaching the right audience in order to achieve optimal results.

Public relations as a profession, is still faced with the challenge of unqualified man-power in its operations. It is common to see many in the field with training in disciplines outside public relations. This does not only create disputes in the profession but encourages quackery as the unqualified practitioners engage in substandard and unethical campaigns that they are always unable to defend.

More worrisome is the fact that organization leaders and the public have poor appreciation of the role of public relations. While a good percentage of the public is yet to appreciate the relevance of public relations, leaders of organizations still see no need for employing public relations practitioners. They neither care to encourage an In-house public relations unit nor value the engagement of a consultant to manage their reputation. Often, when they employ a practitioner, it is for mere protocol.

Still an evolving profession, especially in developing countries, the functions and relevance of public relations are yet to be fully appreciated. This is a serious setback to the expansion of the profession, made worse by the fact that public relations is still taught as part of Mass Communication or marketing instead as an independent discipline in tertiary institutions. Lastly, the upsurge in social media networks such as Face book, Tweeter, Linked-In, Net log, etc, has created the challenge of choice in deciding the network to use in reaching the target audience without sounding abusive, self centered and ignorant of the purpose of public relations outing.

On the whole, in spite of the above challenges, there are still some opportunities in the public relations profession that endear it to organizations, government agencies and the general public. First, the profession focuses on building the reputation of all classes of clients that engage its services. As noted by some industry leaders at the 2024 Nigeria Institute of Public Relations Week, NIPRW, in Abeokuta, good public relations is the best for building sustainable economic growth. As a management function, it evaluates public attitudes, noting policies and procedures of an organization with the view of carrying out programs that would enhance public understanding and acceptance. In the opinion of Ike Neliaku, current President of NIPR, any government or organization that neglects public relations will fail woefully in its strategies for success.

Public relations practice becomes more effective in an organization that runs its own means of publicity. That will involve giving expertise opinions on current industry affairs, contributing articles for publications, engaging in studies and sharing the results with the press and stakeholders. In such organizations, the public relations practitioner builds business partnerships that will not only build the good reputation of organizations but also increase their profit margins within a given period of time.

Conclusion

Public relations have gone through many stages in its evolution as a profession since the ancient times. Kings, emperors and other leaders used the practice to project their public image and persuade the people to accept them as divine rulers. The first sign of public relations in projecting occupational achievement was a clay tablet which promoted the agricultural glory of ancient Iraq. Then from Greece, Rome, England and the United States, to other parts of Europe, public relations gradually developed into a noble profession that accommodates renowned academics and professionals that have been in search of theories to standardize the practice. In Nigeria, public relations practice occurred in crude forms as in other regions of the world before it was formally organized as an association in 1963 with only seven members who set it up as Public Relations Association of Nigeria, PRAN.

The association was changed to Nigerian Institute of Public Relations, NIPR, in 1972, and was chartered in 1990 with the power to monitor the activities of practitioners to ensure professional ethics and to admit members with the requisite academic qualifications. One major role of public relations in the old times was

to save kings and politicians from ill public opinions. But today that role has been extended to keeping business organizations and their products acceptable to the consumers as well as to properly educate the public on the ideals, leadership and policies of different groups that engage the services of practitioners. That extension has, however, brought new challenges and created opportunities in the profession. Notwithstanding, it is still an evolving profession with the coming of digital technologies that allow multiple and cheaper choices in reaching desired

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