

Full Length Research Paper

Public relations in corporate reputation management: A case of Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation

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This study aims to explore the practice of public relations management in maintaining relations with the public who interact with a corporate organization. To investigate the role of public relations in maintaining good reputation, a mixed method approach was employed taking Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation as a case study. Data were collected from different instruments such as questionnaire, document review and in-depth interview. The questionnaire was administered to 50 participants, while in-depth interview was done with the public relations department officers of EBC. The findings of this study indicated that the public relation campaign of EBC is not research oriented and the outcome of the campaign is not measured. In addition, survey of the audiences' perception indicated that audiences have negative perceptions towards the organisation. Hence, it is possible to extrapolate that the efforts made by the public relations department of EBC to manage organisational reputation is not successful. This could possibly be due to lack of research-oriented public relations campaign and lack of research on return on investment.

Key words: Corporate communication, public relations, corporate organization, Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporate.

INTRODUCTION

Public relations are the management function that evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or organization with public interest, and executes a program of actions to earn public understanding and acceptance (Miller and Dinan 2007; Siriramesh and Vercic 2003; Gruing 1992). This indicates public relations being a part of management function dealing with organizational communication activities by measuring public attitude, analysing policies, executing program of action, where upon keeping public interest to

win public attention and acceptance.

Similarly, Seitel (2017) Newsom et al. (2004:3) placed corporate or organization reputation at the center of public relations functions. A public relations function is the discipline which looks at reputation with the aim of earning support and influencing public opinion (Seitel 2017; Guth and Marsh 2016; Botan and Hazleton 2010). It is the people who form an opinion over a period of time (about a firm) that gives the organization its reputation. So, maintaining good relations with all the concerned publics

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is important for an organization. In sum, public relations is all about maintaining relations with the public. The corporate organizations need to maintain, enhance and foster good relations with their prospective customers (public) to succeed. The role of public relations in this aspect becomes very important (Seitel 2017; Theaker 2017). From the above premises, one can understand that reputation is the essential and inevitable part in the world of public relations business. Thus, the current study makes an industrious effort to investigate the role of public relation in managing public opinion to develop organizational reputation, using EBC as a case of study.

Research problem

If an organization does not deserve a good image which is really a good reputation, public relations must do something about organisational communication (Jefkins, 2004). This implies that good reputation is essential and requisite to develop good image. Thus, public relations must be alert to convert negative states to positive ones, which lead to goodwill and reputation.

Deficiencies of managing reputation may jeopardize a well-deserved and long cultivated favourable image and identity (Stacks 2016). Some organizations may not even much value reputation, supposing that they may meet their objectives without bothering overly about it. For public relations practitioners, this trend raises serious challenges to their assumed role as the function, which is in control of the corporate reputation (Davis, 2004).

This means failure to emphasis on the reputation of an organization could possibly lead to the destruction of corporate or organizational image and identity, which could possibly in turn convert public opinion from positive to negative (Botan and Hazleton 2010; Siriramesh and Vercic 2003). These could possibly pose a challenge to organization from achieving its objective and success. Even if the concept of reputation is the core in public relations and different theories has indicated correlation between organizational reputation and public relations, different studies suggested the importance of exploring the practice of public relation in different contexts. Thus, the current study makes an industrious effort to explore the practice of public relations from the perspective of reputation management by taking EBC as a case study.

Objective of the study

The objective of this research paper is to investigate the role of EBC public relations in managing corporate reputation. Based on this, the specific research questions were formulated to:

1. Investigate the practice of EBC public relation in managing corporate reputation.
2. Investigate the perception of audiences on EBC.

Review of literature

An overview of Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporate (EBC)

It is agreed that certain events occurred at different times and occasions in the country, considerably contributing to the introduction of television to Ethiopia, similarly, the contribution of foreign corporations and companies. This was so significant in the process of introducing the medium to the country (Teshome, 2006).

As Leykun (2004) indicated, the first attempt to introduce the concept and purpose of television in Ethiopia was made in 1956, when silver jubilee exhibition took place. The main objective of the exhibition, which was carried out by British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) television, however was to indicate the existing political and social developments in the country. In order to achieve the required output in a closed-circuit system, the corporation presented two cameras, four monitors and a few telecasts (Leykun, 2004). Equally important, the founding of the Organization of Africa Unity (OAU) in Addis Ababa was another event for television to be introduced in Ethiopia. In 1963, on the founding of the organization, a temporary closed-circuit television was made.

As a result, some people could follow the proceeding of the meeting on monitors fixed on lobby in an open space in front of organizations hall (Ibid). A year later, on November 2, 1964, as indicated by Leykun (2004), the Ethiopian Television was established by British firm named *Thomson Television International limited*. It is also noted that the transmission time, during its establishment, was only two and half hour a day.

During this time, mass media in general and television were owned by the government. The legislation stated that ministry of information would check whether the public is really informed, entertained or educated by programs aired by the station though checking mechanisms are not stated (Abel, 2005).

When the Derg regime took the state power, television was under its full command and censorship of the government was severe. It was used as a full mouthpiece of the government under the shadow of unity and solidarity. During this time, Ethiopian Television leaped to a full color system. And it covered main towns and cities of Ethiopia, especially in relation to the establishment of worker party of Ethiopia (WPE) in 1983 (Abel, 2004).

Ethiopian Radio and Television Agency currently operates in radio, television and online. Ethiopian Radio was established in 1935. Almost three decades later, Ethiopian Television (ETV) launched its regular operation in 1964 (ERTA, 2000). Ethiopian Radio and Television were merged in 1995 and then it was termed as Ethiopian Radio and Television Agency (ERTA). Following some arrangements in the working environment and structural arrangements, the corporation was named

Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC).

As clearly articulated, service guidance of EBC and the role, structure and functioning of public relations department of EBC encompasses (ERTA, 2000):

1. Focusing on nurturing and managing reputation of agency using multiple medium.
2. Facilitating smooth relationship between the organisation and external publics and within internal public.
3. Responsibility of announcing the vision and mission of corporation for internal and external public for its achievement.

Public relations and reputation management

Many scholars have their own understanding on public relations and often agree on what it is. Up until now there is no uniformly accepted definition for it. However, one common denominator lies on the entire concern of definition. This is all about communication, thereby mutual relationship and understanding between the organization and its publics. A public relation practice is the discipline which looks after reputation with the aim of earning understanding and support, and influencing opinion and behaviour (Stacks 2016).

In other words, it is a discipline that deals will the interaction between organization and its publics. That is what the organization communicates to its publics and in turn, what they react or respond to it. This is because it creates a better understanding and change unfavourable opinion to favourable. Similarly, public relation function is planned effort to influence and maintain favourable opinion through acceptable performance, honestly presented, and with reliance on two-way communication (Etang 2008).

In addition to this, PR to some extent, at its core can be understood as the department which cares and responsible for reputation. The primary function of public relation is the long-term assurance of the survival of the agents involved. This presupposes that these agents can position positively as possible in their field of action and also distinguished from any competitor. This is precisely the function performed by public relations. It is the product of the social process that assigns their agents in raking in society. To this extent, PR can at its core, be understood as reputation nurturing (Etang, 2008).

So, from the above definitions of public relations and its function forwarded by different scholars, one can understand that, it is the nucleus and core department which keeps the reputation of an organization positively for further achievement of its objectives, by changing unfavourable attitude and opinion of client to favourable.

In addition, according to Ahuja (1989) as a management function, the role of public relations includes the following activities:

1. Anticipating, analysing and interpreting public opinions,

attitudes and issues which might impact good or bad operations and plan of the organization.

2. Researching, conducting and evaluating, on a continuing basis, program of action and communication to achieve informed public understanding necessary for the success of an organizations aims. This includes employee or community relations and other programs.

3. Knowledge that may be required in the professional practice of public relations includes communication arts and technical knowledge and skills required for opinion research and public issue analysis

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The objective of this study is to investigate the role of EBC's public relations in managing organizational reputation. To achieve this objective, mixed method research approach was employed. Based on this, an in-depth interview, document analysis and questionnaire were used as a data collection tool.

In-depth interview

Despite some limitations of interview as a data collection tool, the advantages of interview are: the use for intensive investigation of information in greater depth and its opportunity for follow up questions to get clear and detailed answers (Creswell 2014; Kothari 2004:98). Thus, an interview was conducted with the public relations practitioners of EBC. Semi-structured in-depth interview guide was prepared to manage the overall interview procedure. The purpose of in-depth interview is to achieve research objective one focusing on the investigation of the practice of public relations of EBC in managing the reputation of the corporation.

Document review

In addition to in-depth interview, document review was used as a tool of data collection to achieve research objective one concerning the investigation of the practice of public relation of EBC in managing reputation. The documents related to the plan and report of the practice of public relations are significant to explore the practice of public relations in one way and cross-check data gathered through in-depth interview. In sum, document review is significant to achieve research objective one and thus employed in this study.

Questionnaire

Questionnaire was used as a means of data collection tool. With such purpose, questionnaire was administered to 50 randomly selected respondents. The instrument was developed from the literature and items were developed in both open-ended and closed-ended questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative and quantitative data are presented and analysed separately. For the qualitative approach data from in-depth interview, documents are were presented and analysed in an integrated method. Whereas, for quantitative approach, data collected from questionnaire is presented and analysed quantitatively separately.

In-depth interview and document analysis

The in-depth interview was made with the public relations officer of EBC. The questions presented during an interview were concerned about the practice of the public relation department in managing organisational reputation. In other words, the central focus of interview was to explore the role and experience of public relations department in managing the reputation.

The first question of the interview was on the investigation of reputation management as a key role of public relation department of EBC. The interviewee answered...*one of the major responsibility of the public relations department of EBC is to manage the reputation of an organisation....It is clearly indicated on the guideline or job description of this department...*in line with this, the pamphlet produced and distributed by EBC indicates that the public relation department of EBC is in charge of managing the reputation of an organisation.

The second question forwarded to the interviewee is on the practice of public relations in managing the reputation. The interviewee goes on to say that *...we are doing the best in nurturing the reputation of our organisation...we are doing this in different approaches and mechanisms. For instance, we use TV advertisements, radio advertisements etc...* consistent to with the public relations tools used to manage organisational reputation, the report of the department to the organisational management indicated that "different means of communication (for instance, TV advertisement, radio advertisement and brochures) has been used to communicate with our audiences mainly with the intent to develop the image of our organisation.

In response to the third research question focusing on how well the public relation campaign is research oriented, the interviewee goes on to say that...*well, as I spook earlier, our department is responsible for keeping and protecting the reputation of this organisation. We have been working on this since the establishment of the office. No research has been done concerning public opinion and on how to manage the problem... because we simply identify the problem. Concerning this, "Every public relations program or solution should begin with research. Most do not, which is a shame" (Sietle, 1995).* In addition to this, according to Moore and Kalupa (2000), every public relations programs or solutions should begin with research which seeks to understand how well a company is known, its reputation and what public thinks about its products.

Question four was to explore the effectiveness research. Do you really measure the effectiveness of your campaign? The interviewee replied *...we have not measured the effectiveness of our campaign at all. We have no experience regarding the evaluation of our programmes...*similarly, the job description regarding the role of public relations department of EBC, there is no specifications and responsibilities of public relations to evaluate return on investment. In other words, the public

relation department has no decree of evaluating and reporting the outcome of the campaign.

In general, the data gathered through in-depth interview and document analysis indicated that the mission and the major role of public relation department of EBC are to nurture organisational reputation. Hence, the department is working to manage organisational reputation which is in harmony with the theoretical recommendations. However, the approach and mechanism of reputation management is in contradiction with the theory.

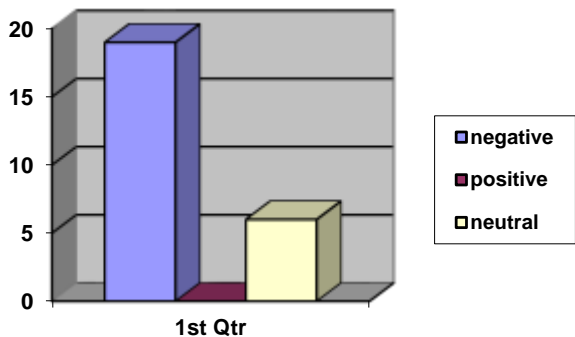
Even though research is essential in every public relations function including assessing and evaluating public opinion towards a company or agency as forwarded by different scholars of public relations, no research have been conducted by the department. Whatever is done by the PR department, it is not research oriented, it is not supported by evidence and facts. What is done is for the accomplishing of job descriptions outlined by the top management.

Not only application or performances of programs are not research oriented but the public relations campaign outcomes do not evaluate whether they are effective or not. In this regard, Moore and Kalupa (2002) firmly argued that effectiveness research or surveys are used to measure the impact of company's public relations campaign on the perception of the audiences. Now, the question remains, if the practice of public relation department of EBC is in contradiction with the theory in the field (which is not research oriented and the outcome is not evaluated); then it is very important to explore the perception of the audiences on the organisation. This seems significant to extrapolate the finding of the study with the theory.

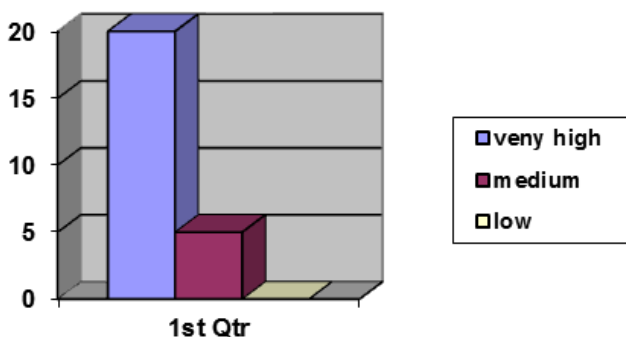
Data presentation and analysis of questionnaire

The quantitative part of this study used questionnaire as a data collection tool. Accordingly, 50 respondents were randomly selected for the purpose of exploring the perception of audiences or customers of EBC regarding organisational reputation. The first objective of the questionnaire is to explore the perception of audiences or customers on the organisation.

Graph 1 shows people's opinion towards an agency described as positive, negative and neutral. Out of the 50 questionnaires distributed to the selected 50 respondents, 39 (78%) have negative perception or opinion towards the organisation. Whereas, 11 (22%) showed neutral opinion. In contrast none of the respondents gave a positive opinion. Graph 1 demonstrates a marked difference of opinion, especially between the desired positive opinion and most probably, the hindrance to the realm of success and achievement which is negative opinion. According to Lippmann (2017), by negative attitude they mean, "giving the individual an unfavourable opinion of a person, issue or organization. It is accompanied by feeling of unpleasantness".



Graph 1. The opinion of people on an agency.



Graph 2. The eagerness of audiences to shift media.

Graph 2 shows how many of the audiences (respondents) are eager to shift the media due to different reasons. From the questionnaire distributed to 50 respondents, 40 (80%) of the respondents are shifting the media with very high degree; whereas the remaining 20% are in medium degree and 0% are not eager to shift the media. From these data, it is possible to conclude that most of the audiences of EBC tend to change their media preference. This will be a challenge to the organisational success and achievement of its objectives. on this regard, Sietel (2017) forwarded that “an important function of public relations research is watching the developments that may become the public relations problems in the future”. Therefore, Ahuja (1989) put forth the essentiality of researching on a continuing basis to achieve informed public understanding necessary for the success of organizations aim.

In sum, from the quantitative data analysis, it is possible to understand the fact that the audiences (customers) of EBC have negative opinion or perception towards the company. Hence, they tend to shift their patronage. Significant number of participants’ response indicated failure of the public relations campaign on EBC.

Conclusion

1. The public relations department of EBC is not capable

of changing negative attitude of people towards an agency to favourable or positive.
 2. The department is not anticipating what will exist near the future regarding the public opinion and looking for solution.
 3. The public relations activities, especially those related to public opinion are not research oriented; rather they are done by assumptions that are not reason and fact supported.
 4. The department do not evaluate the outcome or the effectiveness of its campaigns.

Recommendations

1. The public relations department of EBC must be able to change the opinion of people from unfavourable to favourable state to create mutual understanding to achieve organizational goal.
 2. As research is uncompromising concept in the public relations activity, it must be conducted in regular basis before and after the campaign.
 3. Campaigns by the department must be evaluated, and based on this, it must identify the possible improvements.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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