

Social Media and Public Relations Strategies in Select Banks in Benue State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study “Social media and public relations strategies in select banks in Benue State Nigeria”, sought to find out, the public relations activities that social media were used for by the select banks. The study is underpinned by two- way symmetrical model. Survey research method was employed for the study and questionnaire was the instrument used for data collection. Findings revealed that, crisis management, two-way communication, making announcements, creating awareness, image management and creating awareness about social responsibility efforts of banks were all public relations strategies and activities that the select banks in Benue State Nigeria used social media for. It was discovered that, social media are the best media for effective two- way communication in the 21st century. It was also revealed that crisis management involves taking appropriate measures to prevent a crisis before it occurs or manage/control it well when it occurs. Based on these findings, it was concluded that, for organisations like banks to make tremendous impact in the 21st century, they must continue to embrace emerging communication technologies, that are relevant to achieving two-way communication. Based on this conclusion it was recommended interalia that, two-way communication, can only be effective when organisations, not only listen to the customers but also act on feedbacks from customers.

Keywords: Public relations. strategies, select banks, social media, activities.

Introduction

Social media are 21st century phenomena that have transformed the way organisations like First Bank, Union Bank and United Bank for Africa communicate with their publics. The study “Evaluation of Public Relations Strategies and Activities Select Banks in Benue State Nigeria used social media for.” was necessitated by the advent of social media. The advancement in technology particularly, the transition from web 1.0 to web 2.0 has provided users with new media; which can be used as public relations tools. Social media have made it possible for individuals to chat and share photos online, little wonder Roy (2008) opines that, internet has changed all forms of communication since the beginning of its (internet) existence.

Hendrix (2004) posits that, the advent of the internet and computer technology have impacted the practice of public relations in an ever-expanding way. This is true in that, social media according to Boitnott (2017), have eliminated the walls between members of the public and a brand, shorten the time a company has to react to relevant stories, and blur the line between marketing and public relations. Social media can help the public relations managers of banks perform their jobs easier and faster compared to what was obtained

before now. This is so in that; public relations managers or social media desk officers can react almost immediately to relevant comments or stories that concern their banks. This is true because, the world is becoming more and more connected because of information communication technology. Technology (social media) have now provided the publics of an organisation or banks the liberty, to make comments or express their dissatisfaction about a product or service at any time they choose to. In the same vein technology has also provided public relations managers or public relations desk officers with the same liberty to make comments or defend their companies. The public relations managers of the select banks should endeavour to be fair and objective, and also come up with plans on how to use social media, so as to ensure fairness and objectivity

A good strategy for social media according to Ponce (2018) is to search for influential blogs in your industry and participate in the discussions. This is an effective and subtle way to introduce your business. Twitter now (X) is seen as an effective tool for introducing one's business to social media. This means that public relations managers of banks, can manage customer relations by informing the publics about new products, service or improvements on a product or brand through social media platforms and blogs. Ponce (2018) opines that, by following journalists and writers who target your industry on social media, you can ensure your business is part of the conversation. He maintained that Facebook and LinkedIn are a bit more personal than Twitter (X) and are best used once a relationship has been established. The general idea is to use social media to share content with the journalists and writers who can help you publish even more content about your business. (Ponce 2018). This again shows that social media can be used as public relations tools. As such public relations managers of banks can use social media to build and strengthen relationship between their banks and the publics of their banks. This can be achieve using the various social media handles of the bank.

Though, social media are said to be public relations tools, getting people to read your message may be difficult if it is too lengthy. This is so because social media are inundated with plethora of messages. For your message to attract attention, you must know, "What is good content to use with social media" Ponce (2018) points out the following tips for writing social media content.

- (i) The message must be direct and concise.
- (ii) Use a descriptive and keyword rich headline.
- (iii) Don't embed any media such as YouTube video, but rather link to the media using descriptive text.
- (iv) Place the link with the richest and best targeted text as close to the beginning as possible.
- (v) Target keywords should always have descriptive text and be hyperlinks.

The aforementioned tips for writing social media content can help public relations managers of the select banks to come up with contents or improved contents that resonate with the target audiences.

Statement of the Problem

With social media, information can be accessed within seconds or minutes. Little wonder, Oram (2018) opines that, social media and digital technology have undoubtedly brought many benefits to both our personal and professional lives; social media have also generated a culture of immediacy that can be hard to keep up with. A number of studies have identified the link between social media and public relations practice (Oneya 2010, Quainoo & Antwi 2015, Lee 2013). Oneya carried out a study on “The Impact of Social Media on Public Relations Practice” The study examined the impact of social media on public relations practice. The gap in this study is that, the study did not look at PR activities that social media were used for. The missing link in Oneya’s study is filled by the current study. The current study examined public relations strategies and activities that social media are used for.

The field of public relations has seen social media as useful communication tools; research suggests that, many organisations use social media to build relationship with publics (Sweet & Metzgar, 2007, Trammel & Keshlashvili 2005 in Kent & Taylor 2014).

Based on the aforementioned benefits of social media, the study sought to find out: the public relations strategies and activities that the select banks in Benue State Nigeria used social media for.

Objective of the study

The broad objective of this study was to investigate public relations strategies and activities the select banks in Benue State Nigeria used social media for. The specific objectives of the study are:

- (i) To determine how the select banks used social media for public relations.
- (ii) To ascertain the public relations activities and strategies the select banks used social media for.

Research Question

1. How did the select banks used social media for public relations?
2. What are the public relations activities and strategies the select banks used social media for?

Theoretical Frame work

This study is anchored on Two-way Symmetrical Model. Two-way Symmetric Model according to Otuekere-Ubani (1996) is one of the four models propounded by Grunig & Hunt in 1984. Two-way Symmetric Model is a particular model of public relations that provides public relations managers a new role, no longer is the PR manager a persuader and a one-way communicator. Rather the PR manager has now become a mediator between his organisation and its various publics. This implies that, the core of Two-way Symmetric Model is to ensure that there exists a two-way communication between an organisation and its stakeholders. The public relations manager is expected to ensure flow of information from his organisation to its publics and also from the publics to the organisation. This connotes that, the core objective of Two-way Symmetric Model is allowing feedback from the publics.

Two-way Symmetric Model of public relations argues that, the public relations manager should serve as a link between his organisation and the publics, rather than as a persuader. Here, public relations managers are seen as negotiators who use communication to ensure that all involved parties' benefit, and not just the organisation or client that employs them. The public relations manager by implication represents the interest of both the organisation and the various stakeholders of the organisation. This is true in that, the term "symmetrical" is used because the model is an attempt to create mutual beneficial situation for all. Two-way Symmetric Model is deemed the most ethical model, one that public relations managers and executives of banks should use or should hope to use in their everyday public relations tactics and strategies.

Two-way Symmetric Model was intended to improve communication effectiveness in organisations through public relations managers and executives. Besides interactivity, social media have made it possible for public relations managers and members of the publics to relate on a one-on-one basis. This one-on-one interaction is enabled by technology. This is a clear confirmation of the fact that, social media are the most viable means through which to achieve two-way communication in the age of information communication technology (Omula, 2021). Two-way Symmetric Model provides the organisation with a means to create a level playing ground for negotiation between an organisation and its stakeholders.

Literature Review

Public Relations Strategies and Activities Banks use Social Media For

Crisis management is a public relations activity that, banks use social media for. With the advent of social media crisis online should be attended to immediately before it gets out of control. Okure, Ihejirica & Ohiagu (2024) posit that, when crisis occur in organisations like banks, the banks should take control of the situation by responding as soon as possible. Little wonder, Coombs & Holladay (2010) see crisis communication as the process that involves collecting, processing and dissemination of information needed to address a situation of crisis. The fore going connotes that, communication is critical to crisis resolution. Organisations can be resilient in times of crisis, when they make adequate and effective use of communication. Today social media have become means through which this communication can occur. The term crisis according Larkin & Regester, in Kitchen (2006, P. 217) cited in Omula (2021) is:

An event which causes the organisation to become the subject of wide spread, potentially unfavourable attention from international and national media and other external group (customers, shareholders, politicians, trade unions, families of employee's environment pressure and other activist as group) as well as employee.

Unfavourable media report if left unattended to can degenerate into crisis that may be capable of ruining the reputation of an organisation. It therefore behooves on the public relations team of an organisation to effectively manage such crisis. Crisis management according to Nwosu (1996) "involves taking appropriate measures to prevent a crisis before it occurs or manage/control it well when it occurs (p.106)". This implies that, public relations

managers of the select banks should endeavour to be more proactive in their approach to crisis management than been reactive. Environmental scanning research and contingency plans will go a long way to help public relations managers in crisis management.

To be able to manage crisis effectively Adamolekun & Ekundayo (2007) identify the following guidelines:

- (i) Understand the nature and the impact of the crisis. This means that, the public relations executives of banks like First Bank, Union Bank and United Bank for Africa; need to first and foremost know what the crisis entails before reacting. Simply put crisis management should involve a systematic or scientific approach. This should start by identifying the cause of the crisis. In other words, start with background research.
- (ii) Activate your action plans immediately and accept blames and responsibility. The public relations manager should not, deny or denounce the existing problem. This means that after identifying what the crisis entails, the public relations manager should swing into action immediately and accept blame where the organisation went wrong.
- (iii) Operate an open policy and promptly communicate actions to concerned publics. This means that the media, the employees, customers, shareholders and other concerned publics, should not be kept in the dark as to what the public relations unit or team is doing to resolve the crisis. To achieve this, always ensure a two-way communication in times of crisis. Using the various social media platforms of an organisation would also come in handy in times of crisis.
- (iv) Map out plans to solve the problem so that it will never re occur, this entails coming up with “long lasting solution” to the crisis.
- (v) Show concern to victims, by letting affected parties know that you care. The public relations manager or team should endeavour to let those affected by the crisis know that, the organisation truly cares. This can be by visiting victims, or media apology or retraction of certain statements.
- (vi) Do not count your losses in public, let that be for management consumption only; this is so because, sometimes, it may make affected parties think you are more interested in the losses than the effect of the crisis on them.
- (vii) Be ready to pay compensation to victims, when necessary. It is your cross bear it boldly. This implies that, if it entails compensating victims, PR should strongly recommend it to management. For this is another way of showing that, the organisation cares and is truly sorry.
- (viii) The chief executive should lead the way in communicating crisis resolution. Note that the chief executive must do so after wide consultation and should be coached by public relations team of the organisation. This also means that, in times of crisis the organisation needs a spokesperson, not anybody and everybody should be allowed to address the press during crisis.

In addition, it is also important to constantly monitor what is said about your organisation online or monitor and react to complains online. This is a proactive approach to crisis management. This is true in that, Florendo (2019) opines that, complaints by customers are

nearly always expressed on social media. Social media teams of banks must watch out for such complaints and react to them swiftly so that, they don't escalate to crisis. This means you need to monitor your social media accounts, so as to be able to nip such complains in the bud. Posts can easily be shared or retweeted for more people to see, so time is of the essence (Florendo 2019). Public relations managers should ensure that personal messages are not released in the name of the company as this may lead to crisis.

Two-way communication is a public relations activity or strategy that banks use social media for. Two-way communication refers to the exchange of information between an organisation and its various publics. Two-way communication connotes that, as information passes from the banks to the publics, the publics react in the form of feedback. Two-way communication can be said to be the live wire of every successful organisation, including the select banks. Two-way communication is a public relations strategy that ensures that, not only does an organisation get feedback from the publics, but the organisation act on such feedback when necessary. This position is echoed in Grossman (2023) who avers that, two-way communication entails being open to feedback and posing questions that facilitate this kind of substantive interaction, he continued that, the feedback is used to frame future communication. This is true in that, organisations like: First Bank, Union Bank and United Bank for Africa need to constantly be in touch with the publics of their banks to ensure harmonious working relationship. To ensure a harmonious and mutually beneficial relationship the banks need to act on necessary feedback from the publics. The advent of social media has greatly enhanced two-way communication. This is true because, social media make room for direct two-way communication between sender and receiver. This assertion holds true in that, Arikewuyo, Ozad and Saidu (2018) affirm that, "Social media have continued to make significant impact on users at various levels; the platforms have served as media to create, sustain and enhance relationship among individuals and groups (p. 31)". Social media are the best media for two-way communication in the 21st century information driven world. Giving credence to the preceding point, Grossman (2023) asserts that, "to be most effective it is helpful to think about two-way communication as an engaging dialogue never just a leader monologue (p.1)". Social media are comfortable platforms for dialogues between senders and receivers in communication situations.

Again, social media have made two-way communication easier, cheaper and more effective than what was obtained in the past. Organisations like banks can spend less and still communicate easily and faster with their publics. Burdett (2012) opines that, people who use social media for public relations spread their messages exponentially farther, and immediately monitor and respond to what is being said about them. Burdett maintained that, social media enable public relations managers to interact directly with many users. Grossman (2023) points out the following as benefits of two-way communication between employers and employees: two-way communication heightens level of job satisfaction, by offering employees avenue to air their concerns, ideas and opinions. Two-way communication increase productivity, because it reduces ambiguity about roles and responsibilities. Two-way communication improve trust between employers and employees, which builds internal brand loyalty and offers opportunities for continuous growth. Two-way communication enhance collaboration which can lead to creativity and

innovation across an organisation. The foregoing connotes that, two-way communication with the internal publics, of the banks, can also be of great benefit to the banks. This means that, two-way communication is not just about the external publics.

Making known the corporate social responsibility efforts of an organisation is a public relations strategy, that organisations use social media for. An organisation that intends to give scholarship can create awareness about such scholarship on social media. Making known corporate social responsibility efforts is a public relations strategy, that banks use to gain public support. This true in that, Ijwo and Terfa (2018) argue that, corporate social responsibility is an obligation that extends beyond the statutory obligation to comply with legislation and sees organisations voluntarily taking further steps to improve the quality of life for employees and their families, as well as for the local community. "The impact of a company in any community can only be felt through the company's corporate social responsibility activities, these activities are deliberate, planned and sustained, with the sole aim of gaining favour in the eyes of the host community and other relevant stakeholders" (Ijwo & Terfa 2018, p. 88).

Social responsibility as a public relations strategy is intended to create a good impression about an organisation in the minds of her various stakeholders. The select banks should endeavour to use or continue to use social responsibility to win the support and good will of their stakeholders. There is therefore the need to constantly bring to the attention of the publics the corporate social responsibility efforts of an organisation. Social media have become effective means through which these efforts can be made known to the publics. Social responsibility is a strategy that can create a good impression about the select banks in the minds of their clients and other stakeholders. Good impression created by social responsibility, can make the publics want the organisation the more and make them continue to do business with the organisation. Image is critical to the survive of organisations like the select banks. An organisation with good image is more likely to enjoy goodwill and patronage from the publics than an organisation that has bad image. It is for this reason that; public relations managers must not toy with the image of their banks. Image management is a public relations strategy that banks use to gain support and goodwill from the publics. This position is echoed in Akande (2002) who opines that, "when an organisation's public relations team is planning an action programme, what naturally dominates the programme is unarguably the company's image (P.27)". This implies that, one of the objectives of public relations, is managing the image of an organisation. This is true in that, an organisation that is able to establish a good image before its publics stands to enjoy public support and goodwill. Managing the image of an organisation is critical to the survival of such organisation because "an image is the impression or view held about an organisation, person or institution by the public, it could actually represent a true picture of the person/organisation or false picture (Akande 2002, pp. 27-28)". Mention need be made of the fact that the impression stakeholders have about the select banks will determine the extent to which such stakeholders are willing to go in order to do business with the select banks. If the impression in the minds of the publics towards the banks are favourable then, the publics is more likely to do business with the banks; if the reverse is the case, then, the publics will more likely not want to do business with the select banks.

Public relations managers and social media teams of: First Bank, Union Bank and United Bank for Africa, should therefore, not toy with the image of their banks when carrying out public relations campaigns. Public relations managers of the select banks should always endeavour to ensure that, in “whatever they do” they should try to leave good impression about their banks in the minds of the publics. This is in line with the submission of, Akande (2002) who opines that, it is required for those in public relations practice to do everything within their professional ability to combat things that would leave negative impressions in the minds of the publics.

Research Method

The study adopted survey research method. Survey research method entails the use of quantitative approach. Survey research is considered appropriate for this study because it affords researchers opportunity to investigate problems that involve requesting answers from human beings. It deals with data collection for the purpose of describing, interpreting, evaluating and analyzing existing conditions or variables, and prevailing situation (Akem 2007). Survey also allows researchers the opportunity to study a representative sample of the population. Questionnaire was the instrument used to collect data. The population of this study is 81,299 obtained thus: First Bank, North Bank, Makurdi – 19000 (source: Marketing Associate); Union Bank, Wurukum, Makurdi – 17000 (source: Head of Operation), and United Bank for Africa Wurukum Makurdi – 45299 (source: Relationship Officer).

Sample Size Determination. The sample size was determined using the Morgan & Krejcie (1970) sample size determination table. The Table states that, if the population of study is 75,000 and above but less than 100,000, then the sample size should be 382. This study has a population of 81299 which is above 75,000 but less than 100,000.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Banks Can Communicate Best with their Publics in the 21st Century Using

Statement	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Two-way communication	360	94.2
One-way communication	17	4.4
Not sure	5	1.3
Total	382	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

Table 1 shows that majority of the respondents, 360 representing 94.2% were of the view that social media are the best channel for achieving two-way communication in the 21st century. This shows that two-way communication is a public relations strategy that, banks used social media for. 17 respondents (4.4 %) went for one-way communication while, 5 respondents (1.3%) were not sure. Based on the views of majority respondents it can be established that, social media are the best media for two-way communication in the 21st century. This is so because the views of those respondents that held divergent opinions cannot hold against the majority respondents.

Table 2: One of the following is a PR activity that entails the use of social media

Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Manage crisis online	375	98.1%
Cause crisis online	2	0.5%
Not sure	5	1.3%
Total	382	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

Data in Table 2 revealed that, managing crisis online is a public relations activity or strategy that, banks used social media for in the 21st century. This is in line with the submission of the majority respondents, 375 representing 98.1%. The views of 7 respondents (1.8%) who held contrary opinions cannot hold against those of 98.1%. It can be concluded that, managing crisis online is a public relations strategy that banks used social media for.

Table 3: In the 21st century banks can use social media for PR activities like

Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Making announcements	34	9
Creating awareness	54	14
All of the above	294	77
None of the above	-	-
Total	382	100

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

It is glaring in Table 3 that, making announcements and creating awareness are public relations activities that social media are used for by banks in the 21st century. This Table revealed that, while 34 respondents were of the opinion that, making announcement is a public relations activity banks use social media for. 54 respondents (14%) on the other hand agreed that, creating awareness is a public relations activity that banks used social media for. However, 294 respondents (77%) were of the opinion that both making announcement and creating awareness are public relations activities that banks used social media for. Based on the views of 77% respondents, it can be argued that, creating awareness and making announcements are public relations activities that social media are used for in the 21st century.

Table 4: Social media can be used by banks for public relations activities such as

Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Manage image online	15	4
Managing relationships	20	5.2
All of the above	345	90.3
Not sure	2	0.5
Total	382	100

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

In Table 4, it can be established that, to manage image online and to manage relationships are public relations activities that social media are used for. Besides the two respondents (0.5%) that were not sure, every other respondent held this view. Even though, 4% of the

respondents said it can be used to manage only image. Another 5.2% said it can be used to manage relationship. However, majority respondents, 90.3% said, social media can be used to manage image and relationships online.

Discussion of Findings

The objective of this study was to investigate public relations strategies and activities the select banks in Benue State Nigeria used social media for. Finding revealed that, two-way communication is a public relations strategy that banks used social media for. It was revealed that social media are the best media for two-way communication in the 21st century. This is in line with the submission of Arikewuyo *et al.* (2018) who agreed that, social media are making noteworthy impact on users at various levels; and that, the platforms have served as media to create, sustain and enhance relationship among individuals and groups. Social media providing avenue for two-way communication revalidate the tenets of two-way symmetric model that was used for this study. This shows that two-way symmetric model is still relevant for studies in public relations and other related fields.

Again, it was discovered that, crisis management is a public relations strategy that banks used social media for. This is evident in Table 5, where 375 respondents representing (98.1%) agreed so. Nwosu (1996) asserts that, crisis management involves taking appropriate measures to prevent a crisis before it occurs or manage/control it well when it occurs. This connotes that, social media are channels through which banks can react to comments, queries and complaints that emanate from customers. This is so because, if not properly addressed it might result to full blown crisis. Little wonder Okure *et al.* (2024) posit that when crisis occur in organisations like banks, they should respond as soon as possible. The preceding point is echoed in Coombs & Holladay (2010) who see crisis communication as a process that involves collecting, processing and dissemination of information needed to address a situation of crisis. Managing crisis using social media entails reacting to and responding to customers' complaints and comments.

It was further revealed that, making announcements and creating awareness are public relations activities that banks used social media for. Banks can make announcements and create awareness about opening of new branches, improved service delivery, press briefing, recruitments etc using social media. In Table 7, a huge majority of the respondents, 345 representing (90.3%) vehemently acknowledged that, making announcement and creating awareness are public relations activities that banks used social media for.

Conclusion

For organisations like banks to make tremendous impact in the 21st century, they must continue to embrace emerging communication technologies, that are relevant to achieving two-way communication.

Recommendation

- (i) Two-way communication, can only be effective when organisations, not only listen to the customers but also act on feedbacks from customers.
- (ii) Banks should expand their social media reach so as to be able to reach more customers on social media for effective two-way communication.

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