

# AN ASSESSMENT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY IN CROSS RIVER STATE, NIGERIA

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## Abstract

The study focused on public relations strategies in the hospitality industry in Cross River State, Nigeria. The paper explored public relations strategies for boosting business and learning how hospitality industries use PR tools and strategies. The study was anchored on the social exchange theory which advocates for a two-way persuasive communication. It utilizes persuasive communication to influence the attitudes and actions of key stakeholders. The paper uses descriptive, analytical and qualitative techniques to reach its conclusions. The research revealed that the application of public relations strategies to the hospitality industry represents a positive drive for development. The paper posits that public relations strategies, if used in hospitality industries have the potentials for business development. The study called for continuous implementations of public relations for hospitality industries. Business executives act fast and align with the train of development in order to revitalize the hospitality environment as recommended by public relations theories, by introducing strategic public relations, without which the Nigerian hospitality industries may be missing the link. It therefore concluded that effective PR strategies have a favourable effect on hospitality reputations, growth, and goodwill.

**Keywords:** *Public relations, strategies, hospitality, industry, Business development.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Public relations has a great importance in hospitality industries. Public relations in hospitality industries involves managing communication with different stakeholders, such as the general public, the media, clients, investors, staff members, and others. By successfully and openly interacting with these stakeholders, PR aims to develop and maintain a favourable reputation and connection with its internal and external public.

Public relations in the hospitality industry is responsible for promoting brands and maintaining their reputation. PR also helps

increase awareness of a hospitality business services to potential clients. To achieve its goals, PR experts employ a range of strategies to bring public opinion and alter impressions of their organisation or client, including media relations, social media management, crisis communication, event planning, and community engagement.

According to Yang et al., 2017 hospitality industries usually have several management functions in order to help them operate at their maximum capacity: research and development, finance, legal, human resources, marketing, and operations. These functions are all linked together by a common set of strategies that tie in to an overall vision of the future and an underlying set of values focused on the development success of the organisation.

Asemah et al., 2020 observed that no formal business organisation is an island. Each is composed of an internal system of social networks, and each exists within a framework of interrelated systems of relationships with key stakeholders such as competitors, consumers, sponsors, regulators, and the media.

The unique function of public relations is to help the business develop and maintain relationships with all of its key publics and stakeholders by effectively communicating with these groups. Communication is key in maintaining a satisfactory, long-term, trusting relationships with publics and stakeholders. Yet, without efficient transmission, these systems as enunciated by these scholars cannot be effective. Therefore, the efficient transmission of communication signals, which we refer to here as public relations strategies, is the main stay of this study.

Asemah, et al., 2020; Okoi & Agba, 2023, therefore, argue that public relations is an important subsystem of the hospitality industry

and business organisation and the effective practice of public relations is integrally bound to the health of a business. As such, it provides the avenue for the business to effectively monitor, interact and react with other key groups within the business environment. Public relations is thought of as the communication and action on the part of a business that supports development and maintenance of mutually beneficial relationships between the business and the groups with which it is interdependent.

The above, therefore, shows that public relations, as a subsystem within the hospitality organisation, plays an important, if not integral, part in ensuring that businesses meet their overall aims and objectives. Gregory, 2016 is of the opinion that public relations strategies in the hospitality industry is a necessity in order to enhance business growth and ensure proper image and goodwill. A business that maintains its reputation before the public is likely to sell its goods and services.

The term public relations is a broad one and it has been conceptualised by different scholars in diverse ways. One of the most simplified definitions of the term was put forward by Fitch & L'Etang, 2017. The authors consider that any attempt to portray oneself to others in a particular way is considered public relations.

According to Egbulefu & Nwaoboli, 2023, public relations is a strategic managerial activity that aims to establish and sustain mutually advantageous connections between an organisation and the general public. The outcome of these efforts significantly impacts the overall performance and outcomes of the organisation.

Egbulefu & Nwaoboli, 2023a describe public relations as any form of communication which is aimed at bringing about goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics.

Greco, 2019 further explains public relations as a planned communication that concerns every organisation, whether commercial or non-commercial, government inclusive. This is because every business organisation needs to create a favourable image for itself before its internal and external publics for successful operation. Through effective public relations, a business organisation will be able to gain public acceptance.

According to Asemah, 2011 public relations is considered a two-way communication between an organisation and the audience critical to its success. Asemah, 2011 further describes public relations as an activity geared towards the construction of positive image or reputation for an organisation and it also influences peoples' attitudes towards a particular brand. It suffices to state that public relations is responsible for the creation of favourable attitudes among key audiences. Kotler, 2016 points that as a management function, it is primarily responsible for shaping and implementing mediation policies, among socio-political and economic interests, which could influence the growth, survival and development of the hospitality industries.

Okoi, Obukoadata & Ebia (2021) consider that public relations are essential to the hospitality sector since they assist in creating and preserve a favourable public perception of the industry, hotel, restaurant, or any other hospitality firm. Having a solid public relations plan is crucial for the success of hospitality. Public relations may contribute to the development of a positive reputation and the fostering of enduring connections that foster corporate growth and success, whether through the media, social media, or community engagement. In order to attract and retain customers, it is essential to maintain relationships with customers, staff, the media, and other stakeholders. These connections may be cultivated and strengthened with the aid of public relations. However, the potential benefits of incorporating public relations as a strategic tool for enhancing promotion have often been underestimated, resulting in missed opportunities for campaign success.

Therefore, the primary objective of the public relations practitioner is to cultivate a robust corporate image, brand recognition and reputation, by means of strategic public relations endeavours. This can raise customer satisfaction, and eventually boost income. This study aims to examine the public relations strategies for the hospitality industries in Cross River state (Cutlip et al., 2022; Folarin, 2006).

## 2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

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Succeeding in the hospitality industry is a difficult task that requires effective strategies, that can help boost and promote the goals of the organisation.

This practical application is found in public relations activities and its theoretical framework within the hospitality industry. Public relation is crucial in the promotional activities and the communications of hospitality industries that needs to be strategically position. The ultimate goal for any hospitality industry is to deliver high quality service to its guest, increase business capabilities and expand its reach to achieve growth, and financial stability, while maintaining profitability.

In spite of this, there is a lack of association between theory and practice in public relations in the hospitality industry. On the one hand, the theory, models and concepts of public relations have neither been developed nor applied in this industry, which continues to be conceptually dominated by marketing. Public relations activities are prevalent in the practices of the industry: public relation is the predominant activity in promotion and communication in the hospitality industry. This lack of association is perpetuated because tourism marketing has taken more attention than the hospitality industry which pioneered the industries.

However, owners and managers of hospitality industry seem not to have come to terms with the significance of public relations. The hospitality industry needs to come to the terms that public relations strategies, if effectively used, may lead many of them to record significant results in patronage, loyal publics, financial impact, customer satisfaction, profit margin and increased revenue. To achieve all these, hospitality organisations need a satisfactory public relations strategy.

In an attempt to fully understand the depth of public relations strategies in the hospitality industry, the Transcorp's hotel was selected for the study because it is at the central core of hospitality industry in Cross River state.

## 3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

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The study was guided by the following objectives:

- i. Ascertain the significance of public relations strategies in the hospitality industry.
- ii. Determine the various public relations tools and strategies used in Transcorp's hotel Calabar.
- iii. Identify the best practices for effective public relations in the hospitality industry.

The study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge in the field of hospitality and marketing. This research will increase the awareness of potential business managers of the influence and functions of public relations in the hospitality industry. If public relations strategies are effectively utilized, they help boost financial stability, brand promotion, sales increment and profit maximisation, which would in turn bring about business development.

The study aims also to increase the knowledge of public relations practitioners in the hospitality industries and analyse how others public relations practitioners in other countries use public relations in order to improve their businesses and their organisational reputations. It is expected that through this study the public relations practitioners would make efforts towards building a reputable local and international image for their business. The outcome of this research would further make the managers of the hospitality industries and business managers in Cross River State, Nigerian, use more of public relations strategies in their businesses.

## 4. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

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### Hospitality Industries

Within a nation's economy, there are many industries to grow and develop the nation. Kotler (2016) posits that hospitality industries represent service industries that provide tangible services to satisfy the customer. Hospitality has become a major industry as it makes significant contributions to many economies. Hence, it is an important part of

national development. The hospitality industry needs to be positioned as a very important aspect for emerging tourism markets.

According to United Nations World Tourism Organisation, media reporting is significant to hospitality and tourism because the vast majority of travel decisions are made by people who have never seen the destination first hand for themselves.

The hospitality industry has finally embraced marketing concepts that other industries have been using successfully for decades. Marketing represents a very important matter in hospitality, travel and tourism industry, as it is the most important management influence that can bring the size and behaviour into the foremost tourism market. Theoretically, the public relations strategy is useful to improve poor relations and build relationships which occurred as a result of several unfortunate marketing events (Kotler 2016).

### **Areas of Hospitality**

The main objective of the hospitality industry is to focus on a high quality customer base, providing quality service and a memorable experience. Kotler (2016) listed out three main areas of the hospitality industry to include: accommodation (hotels), food and beverage (restaurants, fast food), and travel and tourism (airlines, destinations).

All areas of hospitality focus on the customer. In the hospitality industry, public relations represents more than a necessity. To meet the constant challenges, the public relations in the hospitality industry should evolve towards turning into a management function, which should lead to a responsible approach.

According to specialists, cultivating public relations takes longer, but when it is actuated, it can contribute to promoting the company on the market (Asemah, 2017; Kotler 2016).

### **Public Relations**

There are many definitions of public relations which led to some form of misconception, but nonetheless, some basic parameters always help avail us with a frame with which we can conceptualize the concept. In the opinion of Asemah, 2017, every organisation that operates in a particular market or industry is generally never

isolated from the environmental elements that can affect its survival. The elements that are very relevant to its operational processes, such as suppliers, consumers, and intermediaries, can be categorized as stakeholders or publics whose influence is no less important. Thus, there is the need for effective strategic public relations as an approach to manage these elements in order to create and sustain favourable image and reputation for business development.

Public relations is one of the promotional tools that gained importance in brand promotion, especially with its effectiveness in building business organisations and increasing credibility and customers loyalty. In other words, it establishes cordial and fruitful relationships between an organisation and its publics, including directors, customers, suppliers, bankers, creditors, shareholders, community leaders, media, top management officials and agencies.

Rivero, 2014, describe public relations as any form of communication which is aimed at bringing about goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics. Public relations is a management function which helps in establishing a favourable relationship between an organization and its publics. The activities handled by the public relations department include: conflict resolution or crisis management, internal or employee relations, community relations, promotions, media relations, and sponsorship programmes. Public relations is acknowledged to be vital to the survival of business organisations, institutions and individuals.

Rivero, 2014, opine that since public relations functions are all about creating mutual understanding through information and communication, as well as, monitoring, relationships, and reputation management, and maintaining an effective working environment within the business organisation through employee communication, the attempt to maintain mutual understanding with its internal and external publics for harmonious coexistence can no longer be overemphasized.

Asemah et al., 2020 argues that public relations, which is the most valuable asset of a business, is uniquely placed to identify and understand the needs and expectations of the business

organisation's environment, such as those related to the business through decision-making processes in order to generate a response or action that meets the combined needs of the organisation and its environment. Hence, the business most effective strategy to manage its publics for development is through public relations strategies.

Public relations strategies are relevant marketing tools that businesses can use in order to attract and persuade customers. Through the integration of communication tools such as, advertising, sales promotion, social media or digital marketing, businesses lay a major emphasis on building relationship based on trust and loyalty.

### **The Public Relations Functions**

The categorization of specialist jobs in public relations involves establishing connections and making appeals to certain publics in order to foster understanding and acceptance of specific policies, procedures, individuals, causes, commodities, and services (Egbulefu & Nwaoboli, 2023b).

The main duties of public relations are the establishment and maintenance of favourable connections with both the internal and external audiences of an organisation or business. These publics, sometimes referred to as the stakeholders of the company, encompass a wide range of entities, including people, commercial organisations, governmental bodies, and social groups.

The primary objective of public relations in a business is to facilitate the establishment of credibility and confidence among customers. It not only contributes to the enhancement of information pertaining to the business, but also allows it the chance to establish, regulate, and distribute its message to individuals, both within or outside the company.

Public relations functions are effective in promoting the business, facilitating communication during a crisis, and safeguarding the business reputation against media attacks (Zeithaml, & Bitner, 2000). In business organisations, trust and value are mainly gained from reputation. The reputation of a business represents the most valuable asset. By implication,

business consider maintaining the relationship between its clients the most vital aspect. Research has shown that public relations functions are of essential and the ultimate significance when it comes to marketing or promoting a brand.

Asemah et al., (2022) provided a comprehensive list of justifications for the significance of public relations functions.

- i. The major focus of public relations is to build reputation and enhance awareness among individuals by providing information on the product specifications and the fundamental principles of the business.
- ii. Public relations cultivate a favourable perception and esteem for the business through the implementation of public relations strategies. It builds its public image and cultivates a positive standing within the consumer community.
- iii. Public relations builds customer loyalty through businesses actively engaged in robust public relations practices.
- iv. One of the key benefits of establishing trust and credibility is that it fosters a sense of reliability and dependability. The establishment of trust and credibility among the general population is achieved via the implementation of consistent brand marketing strategies that effectively align the objectives of the enterprise with those of the society and the target audience.

Hence, the most effective strategies used by the hospitality industry in order to achieve successful development are through the extensive use of public relations strategies. Egbulafu & Nwaoboli, 2023b state that public relations is a strategic managerial process which must be involved in the process when developing strategies for building and maintaining business. Public relations as a strategy can clearly increase the economic value of businesses, because it creates brand awareness. Through relevant marketing strategies, businesses can easily attract customers to the company.

### **The use of Public Relations in Hospitality Industries**

In any hospitality industry, trust plays a pivotal role in growing and developing the business. The lack of trust and value can lead to loss of sales.

Hence, increasing credibility in the business and having the desired outcome by improving organisational reputation is achieved through the various use of public relations strategies that educates and informs customers about the organisation and enhances brand recognition, making it more visible in the public domain.

Yang et al., 2017 emphasize that using public relations strategies, the company can monitor the interests of its consumers, partners, investors, and employees, identify threats, and help management to resolve various conflicts. In case of any dispute, they can take action to establish a dialogue quickly. The main focus of public relations is public opinion.

In the current fast-growing market, public relations has become an essential part of marketing communication. It influences the performance of the company's marketing strategies as a whole. Thus, for better opportunities and outcomes, collaborating with a well-established public relations agency is more than essential in order to stay ahead of the competition.

Selda & Betül (2014), observed three functions of public relations in business development, as following:

#### **Public relations enhance hospitality industry visibility and awareness**

Public relations promote brands visibility in a crowded marketplace, where brands are competing for their customers' attention. Public Relations may be able to direct the spotlight of the brand at the timely moment.

Public relations influences, and shapes the desired narrative about the brand by using a blend of public relations tactics including, but not limited to, advertising and media relations, content creation, influencer partnerships, event management, online presence management, and awards, to enhance brand's visibility and help a brand reach new markets and target audiences, expanding its customer base and business opportunities.

#### **Public relations establish trust, credibility and value**

Trust, credibility, and value are the bedrocks upon which successful businesses are built. Public relations emerges as the steadfast

guardian, wielding its strategic prowess to establish unwavering trust, credibility, and value with customers. At its core, the role of public relations is to shape the perception of brand among stakeholders. Through various skilful efforts such as storytelling, thoughtfully crafted messages, and genuine authenticity, public relations strive to weave a narrative that resonates deeply with the target audience. By consistently delivering transparent and compelling communications, public relations build a foundation of trust that forms the very essence of a brand's identity. As trust cannot flourish without credibility, when there is credibility, then there is value. Hence, public relations help to maintain long-term relationships with media representatives, securing opportunities for the brand in order to be featured in reputable publications and online platforms, by positioning it as an authoritative voice and imparting an aura of expertise and reliability that deeply resonates with clients, employees, investors, and suppliers.

#### **Public relations contain crisis**

In the unpredictable landscape of business, crises can strike out, threatening reputations and plugging the organisation into turmoil. For this reason, public relations may play a vital role in managing crises and mitigating reputational damage. As a crisis typically strikes at the worst possible moment, swift and effective communication becomes paramount. Fortunately, public relations strategies can be used in crisis management, by orchestrating timely and transparent communications. Beyond communication, the public relations strategies become the voice of reason and reassurance during turbulent times, by helping to stabilize the situation and restore trust amidst uncertainty. In the digital era, where news spreads like wildfire across social media platforms, public relations play a vital role in monitoring and managing online conversations during a crisis. By actively engaging with stakeholders, addressing concerns, and providing transparent updates, public relations help contain the spread of negative sentiments and counteracts potential reputational damage caused by viral misinformation or a negative public sentiment.

### Theoretical Framework

This research paper is anchored on the social exchange theory which advocates for a two-way persuasive communication. The theory was developed by Thibault and Kelley in 1952. The theory explains why and how a two-way persuasive communication can promote relationship (Ogbuoshi, 2020), with the help of the following assumptions:

- i. Every interaction involves an exchange of goods or services.
- ii. People try to get from others as much as they have given to them.

The social exchange theory explains how we feel about a relationship with another person, depending on our perception of the balances between what we put into the relationship and what get out of it; the kind of relationship we deserve, the chances of having a better relationship with someone else. The social exchange theory encourages explicit acknowledgement of the costs and benefits of actions to be promoted in a campaign, and the efforts to minimize costs and maximize the benefits.

The social exchange theory (SET) is relevant to this study because it helps explain how people evaluate the costs and benefits of the relationships. It suggests that maintaining long-term relationships in business requires a continuous assessment of the costs and benefits for both parties. These theories can be used to understand customer needs and adapt new strategies for business development.

### 5. METHOD

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The area of study for this research is Cross River State, Nigeria. The Transcorp's hotel Calabar formed the study population because it has a functional business activity that the public relations strategies are needed for its business development.

The qualitative research design was used for this study because it enables a detailed gathering of the data needed for this study through interaction with PR managers, and employees under study. This conforms to Ogbuoshi, 2020

position that the qualitative method enables the researcher to study behavioural patterns without being bias or judgmental in a situation under investigation.

The technique for data collection was the in-depth-interview guide which involves face-to-face direct interaction with the individual participants in order to obtain information from the respondents (managers, and employee). The validation of the instrument was made by two experts in the faculty of communication and media studies, University of Cross River State, Calabar. Their corrections and guidance helped in the shaping and structuring of the interview questions. The interviews for this research study were carried out by two researchers.

The purposive sampling technique was used to select PR managers, and employees from the Transcorp's hotel Calabar. The choice of this technique was based on the fact that the destinations selected are in operation and they are perceived to utilize public relations strategies.

### 6. DATA PRESENTATION

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Data obtained were presented and analysed in accordance to how they were used to answer the research questions from the objectives of the study.

#### **Research question 1: What is the significance of public relations strategies in the hospitality industry?**

The PR managers of the Transcorp's hotel Calabar agreed that they have to make use of personal sales, marketing and public relations in their promotional activities. For instance, when asked whether they use public relations as one of their promotional mix, the first participant said: *"we use public relations and personal sales to interact with our customers."* In the words of participant 2: *"we use public relations since we often have our clients come to us."* The response from participant 3: was that, *"yes we use more of face-to-face interaction with our customers because we can easily reach them here and promote our services from what they see."*

They interviewed PR managers indicate that they use more of personal sales in promoting their business. Also, they indicated that their personal sales are more to them like public relations.

**Research question 2: To what extent is the effectiveness of the various public relations tools and strategies used in Transcorp's hotel Calabar?**

The response to this question rose different reactions from the participants. Participant 1 said: *"Yes, the various public relations strategies are effective because while we do the personal sales we also use some form of public relations which is quiet effective."*

The response from participant 3 was the following: *"although Public relations is effectively used here because when we do our personal sale, we do it with some form of public relations."* Also, participant 2 argued that, *"we mostly use personal sales for marketing and little of public relations."*

Data from the above responses shows that participants use more of personal sales based on their market structure. However, their response indicates that public relations strategies have been effectively used.

**Research question 3: What is the extent of utilization of public relations strategies in boosting effective public relations in the hospitality industry?**

In response to the above question, the interviewees stated that public relations strategies have impacted more on their business and other media relations. Most of the respondents said public relations have been well utilized as a promotional tool in boosting their business based on the interactions with their customers as well as the staff.

Participant 3 said: *"yes, we have utilised public relations strategies very well to boost our business and communicate effectively with our internal and external clients."* Participant 1 stated that: *"public relations strategies have helped us in maintaining good media relations."* Participant 2 said: *"we used public relations to manage and control crisis to maintain our business reputation."*

From the above responses, it could be observed that public relations as a communication tool

have been utilised in boasting business development in Transcorp's hotel Calabar based on their relationship with staff and customers, which have transformed positive development.

## **7. DISCUSSION**

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In the above analysis, the result shows that public relations is an agent used to create strategies for the management of a business institution; it always views the image and satisfaction of organisation positively; and through public awareness there will be understanding and strong relationship between the public and services. According to the survey responses, it is implied that public relations is important because it helps business organisations achieve their goals by creating relationships with strategic publics.

To buttress this findings Okoi et al., (2021) in their study reveal that public relations plays a significant role in the promotion and communication strategies. It has an important potential in enhancing public awareness, cultivating market preferences, and protecting market products. This finding was supported by Grunig, 2013. It is therefore impressive that public relations strategies should be encouraged for business development.

The study also reveals that the use of public relations strategies in Transcorp's hotel Calabar was effectively utilised. All the respondent mentioned the effectiveness of public relations with relationship management and improved business. This finding is supported by Selda & Betül, 2014, who revealed that businesses that uses public relations strategies do better with their brand. Yang et al., 2017 confirmed the above finding.

The result showed that public relations strategies used in business that have been most utilised are staff and customer relationships which have been tested. It has been observed that public relations have had a positive impact on businesses. This implies that public relations strategies have created high levels of satisfaction and provided many benefits.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

Public relations strategies influenced and boosted business in recent years. The present study revealed the effectiveness and impact of public relations strategies in the hospitality industry. It was discovered that public relations strategies are important in a business organisation based on its positive role in achieving the set goal of that particular business organisation.

Public relations is an effective way to win over hearts and minds of consumers, and therefore stimulate the selling of products and services. Public relations strategies are seen as particularly useful in changing the attitudes and behaviours of consumers. It is said that good public relations require communication skills, expertise in dealing with all media and the principles of persuasion. As a public relations practitioner, one should know when and what to communicate; this involves analysis, judgment, decision making power, counselling and planning.

However, public relations strategies are used to build business reputation for the management. That is why it is important to continuously attract more attention on the great opportunities that public relations strategies offer, their primary role being the creation of a positive and sustainable reputation.

Conclusively, it is imperative to note that public relations strategies are seen as particularly useful in changing the attitudes and behaviours of the publics. Therefore, public relation strategies are one of the best means used by hospitality industries to grow and develop.

### Recommendations

Based on findings and conclusion of this study, the following recommendations were made:

There is a great need for the hospitality industry to have public relations strategies and to understand that public relations functions have an important impact on service delivery.

To build business reputation and get value, trust and credibility, public relations strategies are important to influence the market by sending persuasive messages to various types of public. Service delivery creates high levels of satisfaction.

The Transcorp's hotel should continue to utilise public relations strategies in order to boost and promote its business set goal.

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