Public Relations Media and the Operations of Nigerian Underwriting Firms

Kunle Ogedengbe, PhD
Mass Communication Department
Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo
Ogun State, Nigeria
ogedengbekunle@yahoo.com, 0803 406 5151

&
Kolade Ajilore, PhD
Professor of Mass Communication
Department of Mass Communication
Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria
ajilorekolade@gmail.com, 0805 513 4044

Abstract

Contribution of insurance to the gross domestic product of Nigeria is abysmally low at 0.3 per cent especially if this is compared with those of South Africa (16.99%), Namibia (6.69%), Lesotho (4.76%) and Zimbabwe (4.09). In changing this, the insurance industry set an objective of reaching three per cent in the short term since 2014. This is however a mirage. This study examined the usage of public relations media in ensuring that the set target is met through in-depth interview method as a qualitative study. Population was the 55 conventional insurance companies in Nigeria registered as at 2017. Four respondents were selected through maximal variation sampling technique. This qualitative sampling technique ensured that the three different types of insurance companies that formed the population of the study were represented. The saturation point was reached at the fourth respondent. The data were analysed thematically. The study found that insurance operations in Nigeria do not adequately use public relations media in reaching their stakeholders and this underlined why the industry failed to achieve the three per cent contribution to the GDP set for the short term. The study concluded that the poor usage of public relations media makes the attainment of the set objective not to be met. Accordingly, the study recommended that Nigerian insurance companies should adequately use the public relations media in order to achieve the target of three per cent contribution to the GDP of Nigeria.

Key words: Public relations media, Insurance operations, Underwriting companies, GDP, Stakeholder theory

Introduction/Background to the Study

The media can make or mar is a cliché in the communication industry. The public relations media is expected to be used to the advantage of an organisation towards the attainment of its set objectives. The insurance industry in Nigeria has employed public relations media over the years towards achieving its objective especially of setting agenda for Nigerians to make insurance a must-do item in their lists. The outcome of this over the years has not been in tandem with the set objectives. This is because insurance penetration in Nigeria is very low. The contribution of insurance to the gross domestic product of Nigeria has been less than one per cent. It is 0.3 per cent (statista.com, 2018). The insurance industry according to the Acting Commissioner for Insurance in Nigeria, who is also the head of the insurance industry in Nigeria, Thomas Sunday, wants to achieve a three per cent contribution to the GDP of Nigeria in the short term (Ogedengbe, 2014). Three years is always regarded as short term my management scholars. After three years (by 2017), the contribution of insurance to the GDP of Nigeria is far from three per cent at 0.3 per cent. At 0.3 per cent, Nigeria has achieved only 10 per cent of the objective. This is failure as 90 per cent of the set objective was not achieved. Has the public relations media failed the insurance industry or is it that Nigerian insurance companies have failed to employ public relations media appropriately in their operations towards achieving the set objectives? This is the central question of this study and it underlines the problem of the study.

Problem of the Study

Public relations media is to ensure leveraging opportunities towards achieving set objectives. This is because public relations, through its media, is the catalyst that is used to ensure that an organisation achieves its objective (Black, 1989). PIELLE Consulting UK, on its website, says public relations “helps organisations deliver better outcomes”. However, despite this application, the outcome is not “better” in the Nigerian insurance companies. Therefore, the problem of this study is that public relations through the use of the media leads to enriched communication effect outcomes but its application by the Nigerian insurance companies is not yielding desirable outcomes as the contribution of insurance to the GDP of Nigeria is still less than one per cent and the three per cent short-term target set by the industry in 2014 was not achieved by the end of 2017. Consequently, the central problem of this study is that public relations media should ordinarily promote the products and services (awareness creation) of an organisation or industry in order to ensure better performance. According to Black (1989), this has not materialised. The fundamental concern of this study therefore is to provide valid and useful answers to the seemingly thought-provoking question that borders on why public relations media seem to have failed to produce desirable outcome in the Nigerian insurance companies.

Despite the seeming big potential in the Nigerian economy, the insurance industry has apparently not been able to tap into the economic potential and bring out economic benefits for the country. Nigeria is said to be a country of 170 million people (Yusuf, Gbadamosi and Hamadu, 2009). With a population of 50 million people, South Africa, which is the second largest economy in the continent after Nigeria (Omanufeme and Emejo, 2014), insurance contributes 16.69 per cent to the economy, Namibia (6.69 per cent), Lesotho (4.76 per cent), Mauritius (4.18 per cent), Zimbabwe (4.09 per cent) and Kenya almost three per cent (statista.com, 2018).

Research Questions

The following are the research questions of this study.

1. What are the public relations media that are employed by the Nigerian insurance companies in communicating with their customers?
2. How did the Nigerian insurance companies employ public relations media in communication with their customers?

Conceptual Review

Ogedengbe (2004) posits that the media (medium being singular) are the live-wire of public relations. It is the conveyor belt. It is the means of passing messages and getting feedback. Media refer to the channels which public relations messages and activities pass through in order to reach the public or stakeholders. Public relations has been said to be a management function that ensures understanding between at least two parties. In ensuring this understanding, communication is the key. It is the element that promotes public relations, and this communication cannot be without media — the platforms of operations. Public relations media refer to the parameters that are used in carrying out plans of public relations. Media of public relations could be safely categorized into five. These are printed media, broadcast media, composite media, two-dimensional media, and oramedia (Oral media).

Printed Media: These are media that come to be through any of the printing processes. They are not transient like the broadcast media. Media under this category are: newspaper, magazine, house journal, letter, press release/press statement/holding statement, features, speech/address, re-joinder, supplement, sponsored books, notice board, invitation card and educational literatures like diary, calendar, annual reports, corporate brochures, direct mail, leaflets and handbills.

Broadcast Media: These are audio, and audiovisual media. They include: radio, television, documentary, video, film, video conferencing and tele-conferencing.

Composite Media: These are media that could be used for multi-purpose events. They are: meetings, exhibitions, trade fairs, expositions (expo), workshops, seminars, annual general meetings, press conferences, media briefings, facility visits, visits, suggestion boxes, customer fora and luncheons.

Two-Dimensional Media: These are media with four sides. They are visual aids. They include: photographs, slides, charts, graphs, bar charts, pie charts, histograms and maps.

Oramedia: These are media that are based on the word of mouth. Oramedia is the cultural media. It is mainly used through words of mouth and the allied communication tools. Jefkins and Ugboajah (1986) said of oramedia:

Oramedia often called folk media or traditional media, are based on indigenous culture produced and consumed by members of a group. Unlike the mass media, which reach many people at a time but have only cognitive influence (knowledge, awareness and interest), oramedia can only reach a few people at a time, but can be an effective relay chain to the mass media … oral media is interpersonal media speaking to the common man in his language, in his idiom, and dealing with problems of direct relevance to his situation (Jefkins and Ugboajah, 1986: 154).

New/Online/Social Media: These are internet-enabled media. They are media of engagement and interactivity. They are media that provide instantaneous reach and feedback irrespective of the distance of the communication parties. Examples of new media include website, email and social media include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp among others.

Insurance: Definitions, Principles and Benefits

Insurance is a financial mechanism that is used to manage inherent risk in life and business. Chiejina (2004) defines insurance as a protection or security that is used against the effects of certain future losses or misfortune. He adds that insurance could also be explained "as an agreement by which one party assumes a risk faced by another in return for a premium payment, and undertakes to pay money or do something of value on the occurrence of the risk" (Chiejina, 2004, p. 1). Akhigbe and Lawrence (1990) define insurance as the act of compensating someone who has suffered a loss; a risk transfer mechanism that the individual or business can use to shift some of the uncertainty of life on to the shoulder of another, usually the insurance company.

Insurance works on some principles. These principles are utmost good faith, insurable interest, indemnity, subrogation, contribution, and proximate cause (Akhigbe and Lawrence, 1990; Akintayo, 2004; Banjo, 1995; Chiejina, 2004; Ngwuta, 2007; Oluoma, 1999). Utmost good faith means that all parties of insurance must be faithful and disclose all material facts that will help in assessing the business. Technically, this is called umbremae fidea (Akhigbe and Lawrence, 1990). Without insurable interest, the insured has no claim to insurance because if the unexpected occurs, it will have no negative effect on the policy holder. Indemnity, according to Ngwuta (2007), is the compensation for a loss or injury sustained in the course of the insurance contract. It is placing the insured in the place he was immediately before the loss. Akintayo (2007) says subrogation is the legal right of the insurer, having indemnified the insured to receive back all the insured's entitlements due from other sources, in order to ensure that the insured did not make profit from his indemnified loss which underlines the indemnity principle of insurance.

Contribution is a corollary of indemnity which was designed to prevent the insured from making profit out of an insured loss or speculating by placing his risk with more than one insurer at the same time (Chiejina, 2004). If he insures his risk with more than one insurer at the same time, all the insurers will contribute to pay the total value rather than each of them paying the total value individually. Proximate cause is the peril that leads to the loss which must be insured, if not, the condition precedent to liability for the insurance company is not met. Parties to insurance business in Nigeria are five, they are called the insurance quintet namely: the customer, underwriter, broker (or agent), reinsurer, and the loss adjuster. The customer is the focus of insurance. He or she is the policy holder. He is the one that transferred risk to the underwriter (insurer) with the payment of premium. The underwriter is the carrier of the risk. He underwrites the risk with a promise that the customer would be indemnified in case of loss.

The broker is a qualified insurer as the underwriter who only solicits for business and places the business with the underwriter/insurer. The broker or agent carries no risk. The reinsurer is the one that insures again all the risks the insurer (underwriter) carries. He provides further protection for the insurer, in case of loss (Chiejina, 2004). The loss adjuster is an impartial interpreter of the policy or document of insurance. He or she advises the insurer how much should be paid to the insured in case of loss in line with the dictates of the policy document/contract. Some people add the regulator to this mix to make it six (heptagon) only that the regulator is external to the insurance business. The regulator/government has no business in business but it can intervene in the process if there is a problem in order to sustain the integrity of the business. The regulator ensured conducive environment for insurance business operations.

Benefits of insurance to the society are many. Chukwuedo (2017) gives eleven, and these include (insurance): gives the insured peace of mind, encourages foreign trade, serves as catalyst for national economic development (which Irukwu (2001) underlines with the position that insurance mobilises funds for the development of the national economy), serves as collateral for facilities by providing additional collateral security for loans from the financial system; this is also supported by Adegbite (2015) and Oluoma (1999). Other benefits are that insurance facilitates foreign trade especially through marine business, spreads risks, and encourages savings especially through life assurance products. It also provides employment and foreign exchange for a country.

Theoretical Framework

This work employed the stakeholder theory of public relations. The traditional position of businesses is that they exist to maximise returns for their shareholders (Olowe, 1997). This is usually achieved at the expense of other publics or stakeholders in the life of the organisation. However, Freeman (1984) cited in Harrison and Wicks (2013), notes that due regard should be given to the interests of other stakeholders. These stakeholders include the customers and the media among others. The media publications are also used to reach other stakeholders. Freeman counsells organisations to identify who or what really counts to their overall success, and that, proactive attention should be paid to the stakeholders. The position of stakeholder's theory is that there are other groups apart from the shareholders whose interests must be catered for as against the position of the economist, Milton Friedman, that an organisation's only expectation is to use its resources very well and make profits for the shareholders (Fontaine, Haarman and Schmid, 2006).

Robbins (1991, p. 131) defines stakeholders as "any constituency in the environment that is affected by an organisation's decision and policies." They are a group of persons who is affected or can be affected by the operations of an organisation towards reaching her corporate objectives and/or who can affect the operations of an organisation positively or negatively. Stakeholders of organisations especially Nigerian insurance companies include customers, employees, communities, suppliers, shareholders, media, non-government organisations and the regulators: NAICOM, NSE, Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN)), National Assembly. The onus is on the organisation to create means to manage these different parties and generate relationships that lead to strategic cohesion for the benefits of all parties directly and indirectly. This is done by integrating the interests of all groups in a strategic fashion that ensures the long-term and going-on successes of the organisation. The public relations media play a significant role in this context. This is the reason that the public relations media can make or mar any organisation or industry especially in its relationships with the stakeholders. But has the Nigerian insurance companies employed the media appropriately in their operations? This study will provide the answer to this question.

Empirical Review

Bhargava (2010) found that there are considerable variations in the use and application of the different online media (tools) of public relations practice in New Zealand. This discrepancy was found to have been influenced by the area of work and experience of the practitioners along with their knowledge of the internet and the organisational environment they operated in. The other finding was that practitioners did not have a full grasp of the nature of online media (tools) and their scope of utilisation in the practice. Through these findings, the researcher met the set objective which was to explore the trends in the application of various internet media (tools) in the public relations practice of New Zealand and the impact these had on certain key aspects of the practice such as skills, encroachment, gender balance and ethics. The study employed a mixed method of survey and semi-structured in-depth interview.

Onyiengo (2014) employed mixed methodology of quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interview, document review and observation) to measure the extent to which the media of communication used for internal public relations in the organisation facilitate effective public relations at Kerio Valley Development Authority (KVDA) in Kenya. The researcher found out that communication was done mostly through supervisors, consultative committees and direct mail but least through house journals, notice boards and suggestion boxes. However, most of the respondents prefer to receive information through house journals, notice boards, suggestion boxes and consultative committees. The author also observed that the management used letters, meetings and supervisors to communicate to non-management employees. The interview with the management also revealed that they preferred to communicate with the non-management employees through meetings, supervisors and letters. It is important to note that the media used by management to communicate to employees offer very little chance of providing feedback from the non-management to the management and this only leads to one-way communication. It can be argued though that committees offered a chance for feedback to be provided but this was only limited to the time when there was a meeting.

House journals might have been the media of preference for most of the respondents as they were more likely to offer a chance for the respondents to also offer their views to management through this medium. Suggestion boxes would also be preferred because they offer a chance for the respondents to express their views. The study revealed that media of communication used for internal public relations were not effective because they did not succeed in communicating effectively to the internal publics. It was also noted that the media of communication allowed only one-way communication. Excellent communication relies on a two-way dialogue between an organisation and its publics. It is no longer enough for companies to use one-way communication to inform or try to persuade people to believe what it wants them to believe. Results from an interview schedule with the management and the public relations officer revealed that most of the media for upward communication was not in place and therefore it was very difficult to get the views of the non-management employees. The results from an observation schedule revealed that although there were many suggestion boxes in most parts of the buildings they were not being used.

Muchilwa, Otieno, Oginda and Oima (2014) had the objective of determining the effect of public relations principles in the management of the Police Force in Kenya through a mixed method of survey and in-depth interview. The sample of the survey was 98 from the population of 220. The researchers found out that public relations media was used in information management and that only top-level management was involved in planning activities.

Shamsan and Otieno (2015) found that media relations in organisational performance was mainly the messages the firm intends to put through to the stakeholders and such message were sent out through press releases to news media in order to publicise company news and anything else that concerns to the public. They also found that there was a significant effect of strategic public relations on organisation performance. Alhadid and Qaddomi (2016) found out that there was an impact of the social media as a moderating variable on public relations and company image. They also revealed that there was an impact of public relations on company's image. With these findings, the researchers met their objective of finding out the moderating role of social media in organisation's reputation management.

Methodology

This qualitative study employed the in-depth interview (IDI) technique. This technique is thoroughly asking the respondent relevant questions on a subject-matter deeply, painstakingly, meticulously and in details. In-depth interviews were conducted with four public relations practitioners, who were heads of public relations of selected insurance companies. The respondents were people of both sexes. The researcher stopped at the fourth interviewee when responses from the fourth interviewee were not different from the responses of the initial three. As such, the saturation point was reached at the fourth respondent. The population was the registered 55 conventional insurance companies in Nigeria as at 2017 according to the insurance regulator in Nigeria, the National Insurance Commission, on its website. The companies are life assurance, general (non-life) and composite insurance companies.

The samples were purposively determined. They sample cover non-life, life assurance and composite insurance companies. The criterions used to select the samples are being a key informant and member of management (or having direct access to the management) of the organisation. The used technique under the purposive sampling method was maximum variation sampling technique. Creswell (2012, pp. 207-208) defined maximal variation sampling technique as "a purposeful sampling strategy in which the researcher samples cases or individuals that differ on some characteristic or trait (e.g. different age groups)." By implication, samples were drawn from each of the three different types of insurance companies (composite, life and general). The research instrument used to elicit data from the respondents was the interview guide. The interview guide was critically examined by academics and a field professional to ensure its reliability. The validity was ensured as the transcriptions of the responses of the interviews were sent back to the respondents for them to confirm that the rendition of the transcript is same as their responses in order to ensure that their

views were adequately captured. They all confirmed that the rendition captured their responses during the interview. Flick (2014) called this communicative validation (sometimes called respondent validation or member check).
The promise of further authenticity made here is two folds: (1) the interviewees' agreement with the contents of their statements is obtained after the interview, and (2) the interviewees develop a structure of their own statements in terms of the complex relations that the researcher is looking for (Flick, 2014, p. 484).

Data were collected through face-to-face interview with the respondents. Three took place at the offices of the respondents while one took place at Elomaz Hotel, Maryland, Ikeja, Lagos State, Nigeria. The outcomes of the qualitative research were presented through thematic analysis (themes) and discourse analysis methods of qualitative data presentation.

Findings

Theme: public relations media that are employed by the Nigerian insurance companies.

Public relations media that were employed by the Nigerian insurance companies are printed media, broadcast media, composite media, two-dimensional media, oramedia and new/online/social media. Vehicles employed in across the media type are: printed media (newspapers, magazines, journals, industry-based publications and leaflets/handbills/flyers), broadcast media (radio, television), composite media (trade fair, customer forum), two-dimensional media (photograph), oramedia (face-to-face, spoken work), and new/online/social media (website, emails, facebook, twitter and instagram).

Theme: communication with stakeholders by the Nigerian insurance companies.

The media (tools) that were employed in communicating with insurance customers across Nigeria are printed media, broadcast media, composite media, two-dimensional media, oramedia and new/online/social media. For the printed media, the insurance companies used different newspapers, magazines and leaflets/handbills across the country. They also communicated through radio (broadcast media) including in the local dialects of the catchment areas of the radio stations. Fewer usage of television, another element of the broadcast media is however the case. The radio programmes ran in some instances in fewer to sixty minutes and they were to enlighten the people on the benefits of insurance. Such programmes included phone-in programmes. One of the interviewees admitted that the company did not do enough on public relations media as its budget had been splashed. Another interviewee said the companies also communicated with their customers through journals and industry-based publications as each customer has a different connecting platform. Another medium/tool used by the insurance companies to communicate with their customers is the flyer for each product. The flyer/handbill was used to communicate the benefits of insurance products to the customers.

On composite media, the interviewees said their companies sometimes participated in trade fair activities but generally in a low-key fashion. Customer forum was also used to enlighten the customers on the benefits of insurance. One of the respondents however said his company did not engage in composite media but used sponsorship to connect with the customers. The companies also used two-dimensional media especially photographs to communicate with their customers usually through photo news. It is similar to face-to-face meeting and the spoken word as forms of oramedia to communicate with their customers. But none used town crier, music, song, dance, drama, drum, and leaders of thought (through thought leadership series) to communicate with the customers.

On new/online/social media, all the four interviewees submitted that they used the new/online/social media through website, emails and Facebook. Use of Facebook as a social medium cuts across all of the companies. Other social platforms that the respondents underlined their usages were twitter and instagram. One of the public relations managers whose company used one social media said “we use only Facebook because of the challenges of managing the social media especially its viral nature.” This, the respondent said was deliberate so that the company could engage in social media that could be managed with the current internal capacity. Another one added that the company employed all these tools to communicate all what was happening within and around the organisation and “we review our operations in a year for a better performance in the next year in reaching far and wide to more customers.”

Discussion of Findings

Nineteen elements are under the printed media, namely: newspaper, magazine, house journal, letter, press release, press statement, features, speech/address, re-joinder, supplement, sponsored books, notice board, invitation card and educational literatures such as diary, calendar, annual reports, corporate brochures, direct mail, leaflets and handbills. Of these 19, only six (newspaper, magazine, journals, press release, corporate brochure, and leaflets/handbill/flyers) were employed by the insurance companies representing one-third (31.57 per cent). This is poor in any assessment criteria. Out of the seven elements of the broadcast media (radio, television, documentary, video, film, video conferencing and tele-conferencing), only radio was partially used with television being down-played. At best its 28.57 per cent. This is abysmally low even compared to the printed media.

Composite media include: meetings, exhibitions, trade fairs, expositions (Expo), workshops, seminars, annual general meetings, press conferences, media briefings, facility visits, visits, suggestion boxes, customer forum, luncheons and dinners. The insurance companies only used four (trade fair, customer forum, meetings, and the statutory annual general meeting). Notably, all these four elements were employed in a low-key format. None of them engaged in pre-annual general meeting press conference and even the trade fair that they participated in was low-key with fewer companies' representation. The two-dimensional media which are media with four sides are eight. These are photographs, slides, charts, graphs, bar charts, pie charts, histograms and maps. Only photograph was reported to have been used by the companies. This represents one-eight (12.5 per cent). The pictures were usually representational pictures where the subjects posed or just passport pictures. Action pictures were not the order of the day.

Oramedia, which are media that are based on the word of mouth and allied communication vehicles, were only used through face-to-face meeting and spoken word neglecting others especially cultural structures and opinion and community leaders as well as the other elements of oramedia found in an African society which are legend (Jefkins and Ugboajah, 1986). The insurance companies have not substantially employed the language of the people to talk to them which may be the critical reason that insurance companies in Nigeria play in the corporate market at the expense of the retail market where the thrust for insurance penetration in Nigeria lies. For the new/online/social media, insurance companies in Nigeria communicate only on website, email, short message service (SMS) and the social media platforms of facebook, twitter and instagram with facebook being the only platform that cut across all the companies. They leave out other social media platforms such as youtube (this may be because they do not really communicate on the television so the employment of the youtube platform may be impossible) linkedin, WhatsApp, flick, and others. Nevertheless, their usage of the online and social media, though minimal, is in line with the finding of Bhargava (2010).

The poor employment of the tools of public relations by these companies is in line with the findings of Onyiengo (2014). Onyiengo (2014) revealed that public relations media used for the internal customers were poorly implemented and in notable cases were misapplied. This has also made the Nigerian insurance industry not to achieve the thrust of the stakeholder theory of public relations. However, the employment of press release by the Nigerian insurance companies is in line with the finding of Shamsan and Otieno (2015). They found that organisations use press releases to ensure corporate communication. This is also in line with Muchilwa *et al*. (2014) who found out that public relations media was used in information management.

This inadequate usage of the public relations media has made the Nigerian insurance companies to negate the findings of Alhadid and Qaddomi (2016) who found out that there was an impact of the social media as a moderating variable on public relations and favourable company image which the Nigerian insurance companies lack.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The poor performances of the Nigerian insurance industries in not meeting the set objective of three per cent contribution is partly caused by the inadequate usage of the public relations media by the companies. They have not used the media to make the industry as their inadequate usage of the media of public relations has marred the industry in its effort at contributing a higher percentage to the gross domestic product of Nigeria.

Based on the findings of this study, the followings are the recommendations. Insurance companies should adequately use public relations media in order to achieve the set objective of increased insurance contribution to the GDP of Nigeria. In this wise, public relations media should be strategically utilised and not rarely employed as a filler which is the present state of usage of the public relations media in the Nigerian insurance companies. Apart from the television, the companies should also employ more elements of oramedia for grassroot communication and promotion of insurance in Nigeria. Above all, the implementation of the recommendations will additionally ensure "better outcomes" which is the hallmark of the application of public relations to organisations.

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