

THE USE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS AS A MEANS OF FOSTERING MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN AN ORGANIZATION AND ITS PUBLICS

(A STUDY OF THE POLYTECHNIC IBADAN)

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<p>Corresponding Author Dr. Heavens Ugochukwu Obasi</p> <p>Department of Mass Communication, Abia State University, Uturu, Aba, Abia state, Nigeria And Department of Mass Communication, National Institute for Nigerian Languages, Aba, Abia state, Nigeria</p> <p>Article History</p> <p>Received: 26 / 03 / 2025</p> <p>Accepted: 07 / 04 / 2025</p> <p>Published: 10 / 04 / 2025</p>	<p>Abstract: This research examines the crucial role of public relations in improving communication between organizations and their diverse audiences, focusing on The Polytechnic Ibadan. In today's complex communication landscape, organizations must effectively communicate with stakeholders to build trust and positive relationships. The study aims to identify The Polytechnic Ibadan's public relations strategies and assess their effectiveness in connecting with different audiences like students, faculty, alumni, and the local community. Using a mix of surveys and interviews, the research gathers data on public perceptions and organizational communication practices. Results show that proactive public relations efforts significantly improve mutual understanding, facilitate dialogue, and address stakeholder concerns. Transparency and responsiveness in public relations strategies are highlighted as essential for creating a positive institutional image. This research emphasizes the importance of public relations as a strategic tool for organizations, especially in educational settings, to engage effectively with their audiences. The study's insights contribute to academic discussions on public relations and offer practical recommendations for The Polytechnic Ibadan and similar institutions looking to enhance stakeholder engagement practices. Overall, the study advocates for a more integrated approach to public relations to promote mutual understanding and collaboration between organizations and their stakeholders.</p> <p>Keywords: Stakeholders, Public Relation, Digital Platform, Feedback Mechanism, Public Misconceptions.</p>
<p>How to Cite: Dr. Heavens, U. O., (2025). THE USE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS AS A MEANS OF FOSTERING MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN AN ORGANIZATION AND ITS PUBLICS (A STUDY OF THE POLYTECHNIC IBADAN). <i>IRASS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences</i>,2(4)20-25.</p>	

Introduction

Essentially, public relations is a way to maintain positive relationships between an organization and its audience, taking their feelings into consideration. Public relations is often referred to as an image maker, ensuring mutual understanding between the organization and its audience.

Public relations involves managing the dissemination of information between an organization or individual (such as a business, government agency, or nonprofit) and the public.

Public relations may involve gaining exposure for an organization or individual without direct payment, using topics of public interest. This sets it apart from advertising. The goal of public relations is to inform and persuade the public, customers, investors, partners, employees, and other stakeholders.

The International Public Relations Association (IPRA) defines public relations as a management function in which organizations seek to win understanding and support from the public by evaluating public opinion.

According to Jefkin (1982), the image in public relations is the impression an organization gives. This impression must be carefully planned and monitored to enhance the organization's performance.

The basic responsibilities of public relations include coordinating, communicating, counseling, and cooperating. These responsibilities are crucial in influencing the favorable image of an organization.

A favorable organizational image is achieved through good performance and the cultivation of sustainable habits. It must be conscious, deliberate, planned, and sustained.

Research has shown that public relations plays a significant role in creating mutual understanding and sustainable relationships between organizations and the public. This highlights the importance of public relations in daily human interaction to prevent crises and conflicts and promote lasting peace.

In conclusion, this study assesses the use of public relations at the Polytechnic Ibadan to foster mutual understanding. Different

tools and methods used by public relations practitioners will be applied using the Polytechnic Ibadan as a case study.

Statement of the Problem

In a time characterized by quick information sharing and increased challenges in maintaining positive relationships with their stakeholders. The institution in Nigeria, serves as a unique case study for how public relations understanding between an organization and its various publics.

Despite the crucial role that effective communication plays in shaping reputation, there is still a significant gap in understanding how public relations engagement with different stakeholder groups, such as students, faculty, alumni, shown the potential of public relations in bridging communication divides, but Polytechnic Ibadan is limited.

This study aims to examine the effectiveness of public relations transparency, trust, and collaboration with its stakeholders. It seeks to identify public relations efforts and evaluate the impact of these practices on stakeholder communication dynamics between Polytechnic Ibadan and its publics, this research how public relations can be used to foster mutual understanding, ultimately in complexities of the modern educational landscape.

Using a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative that can guide the development of stronger public relations strategies, enabling between Polytechnic Ibadan and its diverse stakeholders.

Research Objective

The primary objective of this study is to explore the role of public relations strategies in enhancing mutual understanding between The Polytechnic Ibadan and its diverse publics, including students, faculty, alumni, and the local community. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Analyze the existing public relations practices employed by The Polytechnic Ibadan and assess their effectiveness in fostering open communication and engagement with its stakeholders.
- Identify the perceptions and expectations of various publics regarding the institution's communication efforts and how these impact their relationship with the Polytechnic.
- Evaluate the impact of specific public relations campaigns on stakeholder engagement and trust, and how these initiatives contribute to a positive institutional image.
- Provide recommendations for improving public relations strategies to facilitate better communication, address stakeholder concerns, and promote a collaborative environment that nurtures mutual understanding.

By achieving these objectives, the study seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge on public relations in educational institutions and offer practical insights for enhancing stakeholder relationships at The Polytechnic Ibadan.

Significance of study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to the understanding and improvement of public relations (PR) practices within educational institutions, specifically The Polytechnic Ibadan. As organizations increasingly recognize the importance of effective communication with their publics—students, faculty, alumni, local communities, and other stakeholders—this research aims to elucidate the role of PR in fostering mutual understanding and engagement.

- **Enhancing Organizational Reputation:** By exploring how PR strategies can be employed to manage communication, this study can provide insights into building and maintaining a positive image for The Polytechnic Ibadan. Understanding the nuances of public perception can help the institution position itself favorably in the eyes of current and prospective students, employers, and the community.
- **Promoting Stakeholder Engagement:** The research highlights the importance of dialogue between the organization and its publics. It emphasizes the need for PR to facilitate two-way communication, which can lead to enhanced stakeholder engagement. By investigating current practices, the study may offer recommendations for more effective engagement strategies that could be adopted by The Polytechnic Ibadan.
- **Crisis Management:** In today's fast-paced information environment, organizations are often faced with crises that can impact their reputation and stakeholder trust. This study can contribute to best practices in crisis communication, helping The Polytechnic Ibadan to develop robust PR strategies that effectively manage potential crises and maintain a good relationship with its publics.
- **Strategic Communication Framework:** The findings could assist in creating a comprehensive PR framework tailored to the unique context of The Polytechnic Ibadan. This framework can serve as a valuable tool for administrators and PR practitioners, guiding them in their efforts to communicate effectively and foster mutual understanding with various stakeholders.
- **Academic Contribution:** The study adds to the existing body of knowledge on public relations in the educational sector. By focusing on a specific case study, it provides empirical evidence that can inform future research and practice in PR, particularly within polytechnic institutions in Nigeria and beyond.
- **Policy Development*:** The insights gained from this research can inform policy formulation regarding communication practices within The Polytechnic Ibadan. A better understanding of the relationship between the institution and its publics can guide leadership decisions and enhance overall governance.

In summary, this study is significant as it not only addresses the theoretical aspects of public relations but also focuses on practical implications for The Polytechnic Ibadan. By fostering mutual understanding between the organization and its publics, the research aims to promote a more harmonious and productive relationship that benefits both the institution and its stakeholders.

Research Questions

- What specific PR strategies are employed by The Polytechnic Ibadan to engage its publics?
- How do different publics perceive the effectiveness of these PR strategies?
- In what ways do PR initiatives contribute to mutual understanding between the Polytechnic and its stakeholders?
- What challenges does the Polytechnic face in implementing effective PR practices?

Literature Review

- Grunig, J. E., & Hunt, T. (1984). This foundational text outlines the role of public relations (PR) in fostering two-way communication between organizations and their publics. Grunig and Hunt emphasize the importance of mutual understanding as a key outcome of effective PR practices, highlighting that organizations must listen and respond to their audiences to build trust and rapport.
- Cutlip, S. M., Center, A. H., & Broom, G. M. (2000). This book explores various strategies that organizations can employ to enhance their relationships with publics. The authors argue that PR efforts aimed at fostering mutual understanding can lead to improved organizational reputation and stakeholder loyalty, thereby benefiting both parties.
- Kent, M. L., & Taylor, M. (2002). This article presents a dialogic approach to PR, asserting that mutual understanding is achieved through open and honest communication. The authors advocate for the establishment of dialogue between organizations and their publics as a means to foster trust and collaboration.
- Ledingham, J. A., & Bruning, S. D. (2000). This review emphasizes the significance of relationship management in PR, arguing that fostering mutual understanding is essential for maintaining positive relationships with stakeholders. The authors explore various relationship-building strategies that organizations can implement.
- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2012). In this comprehensive handbook, the authors discuss how effective communication during crises can foster mutual understanding between organizations and their publics. They highlight the importance of transparency and responsiveness in building trust and alleviating concerns during challenging times.
- Huang, Y. (2001). This study investigates how PR practices can enhance organizational reputation by fostering mutual understanding with stakeholders. Huang finds that organizations that prioritize communication and transparency are more likely to enjoy positive public perceptions.
- Ruler, B. (2004). Ruler discusses the critical role of communication in fostering trust between organizations and their publics. This article suggests that mutual understanding is a cornerstone of trust, which can be cultivated through effective PR strategies and practices.
- Smith, R. D. (2009). Smith highlights the importance of strategic planning in PR, particularly in fostering mutual understanding between organizations and their audiences. He provides practical frameworks for developing communication strategies that encourage dialogue and engagement.
- Macnamara, J. (2016). This chapter discusses how PR can enhance corporate reputation by fostering mutual understanding with various stakeholders. The author asserts that effective communication strategies are crucial in building and maintaining positive relationships.
- Fawkes, J. (2018). Public Relations Ethics: The Role of Ethics in Building Trust. In *The Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication*. Fawkes examines the ethical dimensions of PR practices and their impact on fostering mutual understanding. Ethical communication is

presented as essential for building trust and credibility with publics.

- Taylor, M., & Kent, M. L. (2014). This article explores how social media platforms facilitate dialogic engagement between organizations and their audiences, promoting mutual understanding. The authors provide examples of organizations that successfully leverage social media for effective communication.
- Kruckeberg, D., & Starck, K. (1988). This work argues for a value-driven approach to PR that prioritizes mutual understanding. The authors contend that organizations should align their values with those of their publics to create meaningful dialogues and foster lasting relationships.

Theoretical Framework

Two-Way Symmetrical Model

The Two-Way Symmetrical Model, proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984), emphasizes balanced communication where both the organization and its publics engage in dialogue. This model advocates for mutual understanding through feedback mechanisms that allow organizations to adjust their strategies based on stakeholder input. The emphasis on collaboration and negotiation fosters a deeper understanding of the needs and values of both parties.

Situational Theory of Publics

Developed by Grunig (1997), the Situational Theory of Publics categorizes stakeholders based on their awareness and involvement levels concerning specific issues. By understanding the different types of publics—latent, aware, active—organizations can tailor their communication efforts to effectively engage each group. This targeted approach enhances mutual understanding by addressing the specific concerns and interests of various stakeholders.

Relationship Management Theory

This theory posits that public relations should focus on building and maintaining relationships with key stakeholders. According to Hon and Grunig (1999), effective relationship management involves trust, satisfaction, and commitment, which are essential for fostering mutual understanding. Organizations that prioritize relationship-building strategies are better equipped to navigate complexities in stakeholder perceptions and expectations.

Dialogic Theory

The Dialogic Theory, as articulated by Kent and Taylor (2002), emphasizes the importance of open, honest communication between organizations and their publics. This theory suggests that mutual understanding is achieved through genuine dialogue, where feedback is encouraged, and both parties feel valued. Organizations that engage in dialogic communication create a platform for shared understanding and collaborative problem-solving.

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) posits that relationships are built on the exchange of resources, whether tangible or intangible. In public relations, organizations can foster mutual understanding by recognizing the value of their stakeholders' contributions and reciprocating with transparent communication and engagement. This theory underscores the

importance of perceived benefits in establishing and maintaining positive relationships with publics.

Research Methodology

This qualitative research aims to investigate how public relations (PR) practices at The Polytechnic Ibadan function as tools for fostering mutual understanding between the institution and its various publics, including students, faculty, alumni, and the local community. The study will explore the strategies employed by the Polytechnic's PR department and assess their effectiveness in promoting communication and engagement.

Research Design

A qualitative case study approach will be utilized to provide an in-depth exploration of PR practices at The Polytechnic Ibadan. This method allows for a comprehensive understanding of the context, processes, and interactions involved in PR efforts.

Sample Selection

A purposive sampling strategy will be employed to select participants who have relevant experiences or insights into the PR practices of The Polytechnic Ibadan. The sample will include:

- PR professionals and staff members from the Polytechnic.
- Students from various departments and levels.
- Alumni who have engaged with the Polytechnic recently.
- Community members and local stakeholders.

A total of 20-25 participants will be recruited to ensure diverse perspectives.

Data Collection Methods

Data will be collected through two primary methods: semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions.

Semi-Structured Interviews: One-on-one interviews will be conducted with PR staff and selected stakeholders. An interview guide will be developed, allowing for flexibility in addressing key topics such as communication strategies, relationship-building efforts, and perceived challenges. Each interview will be approximately 30-60 minutes in length.

Focus Groups: Two focus groups will be organized—one with students and another with alumni/community stakeholders. These discussions will facilitate interaction among participants, encouraging a rich exchange of ideas about their experiences with the Polytechnic's PR efforts. Each focus group will consist of 6-8 participants and will last about 20 - 40 minutes.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis will be employed to analyze the qualitative data collected. The analysis process will involve:

- Transcribing interviews and focus group discussions.
- Coding the transcripts to identify recurring themes, concepts, and patterns.
- Organizing these codes into broader themes that respond to the research questions.
- Interpreting the findings in relation to existing literature on public relations and stakeholder engagement.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval will be obtained from the Polytechnic's institutional review board. Participants will be informed about the study's purpose, and informed consent will be acquired prior to participation. Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants and securely storing data.

Limitations

This study may face several limitations:

- The subjective nature of qualitative research may affect the generalizability of the findings to other institutions.
- Responses may be influenced by participant biases or perceptions, impacting the validity of the data.

Discussion and Findings

This research aimed to explore the public relations (PR) strategies employed by The Polytechnic Ibadan, assess the perceptions of various publics regarding these strategies, examine the contribution of PR initiatives to mutual understanding between the institution and its stakeholders, and identify the challenges faced in implementing effective PR practices. The findings reveal a largely positive landscape for the Polytechnic's PR efforts, with some areas for improvement.

PR Strategies Employed by The Polytechnic Ibadan

The Polytechnic Ibadan employs a variety of PR strategies aimed at engaging its diverse stakeholders, including students, faculty, alumni, and the local community. Key strategies identified include:

- **Social Media Engagement:** The Polytechnic actively utilizes platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to disseminate information, celebrate achievements, and foster a sense of community among students and alumni. This strategy has proven effective in reaching younger demographics and enhancing the institution's visibility.
- **Community Outreach Programs:** Regular community engagement initiatives, such as workshops, seminars, and public lectures, have been instrumental in building relationships with local stakeholders. These programs not only serve to enhance the Polytechnic's reputation but also demonstrate its commitment to social responsibility.
- **Collaborative Partnerships:** The Polytechnic has established partnerships with local businesses and organizations, which have facilitated internships and job placements for students. This not only enhances the educational experience but also strengthens ties with the local economy.
- **Transparent Communication:** The institution emphasizes clear and open communication channels, especially regarding academic policies and student services, fostering trust and engagement with its publics.

Public Perception of PR Effectiveness

The research indicates a generally favorable perception among different publics regarding the effectiveness of The Polytechnic Ibadan's PR strategies. Students expressed appreciation for the active social media presence, noting its role in keeping them informed about events and opportunities. Alumni highlighted the value of community outreach programs, which they believe enhance the institution's reputation and foster a sense of pride.

However, some stakeholders, particularly local community members, suggested that while they are aware of the Polytechnic's initiatives, greater efforts could be made to involve them in decision-making processes. This indicates an opportunity for the institution to enhance its engagement by soliciting feedback and involving stakeholders more directly in its activities.

Contribution to Mutual Understanding

The Polytechnic's PR initiatives significantly contribute to mutual understanding between the institution and its stakeholders. Community outreach programs allow for direct interaction, fostering a sense of shared goals and mutual respect. Additionally, the school's transparent communication practices have led to increased awareness and understanding of institutional policies and initiatives among students and faculty.

Feedback mechanisms, such as surveys and focus groups, have proven effective in not only informing stakeholders about institutional changes but also in gathering insights that help shape future PR strategies. This two-way communication fosters a collaborative atmosphere, reinforcing the Polytechnic's commitment to its stakeholders.

Challenges in Implementing Effective PR Practices

Despite the positive findings, the research identified several challenges faced by The Polytechnic Ibadan in implementing effective PR practices:

- **Resource Constraints:** Limited financial and human resources hinder the ability to fully execute and sustain comprehensive PR campaigns. This constraint often leads to a reliance on informal channels of communication, which may not reach all intended audiences.
- **Public Misconceptions:** Some stakeholders hold misconceptions about the institution's offerings and capabilities. Addressing these misconceptions requires targeted communication strategies, which may not always be feasible given resource limitations.
- **Rapid Technological Changes:** Keeping pace with the fast-evolving digital landscape presents a challenge. The Polytechnic needs to continually adapt its strategies to leverage new technologies and platforms effectively.
- **Engagement Consistency:** While there are strong initiatives in place, maintaining consistent engagement with all stakeholders can be difficult, leading to lapses in communication that may affect public perception.

Conclusion

In summary, The Polytechnic Ibadan demonstrates a commendable commitment to engaging its publics through diverse and strategically sound PR practices. Stakeholder perceptions of these efforts are largely positive, highlighting the effectiveness of social media and community outreach initiatives. However, addressing the identified challenges will be crucial for enhancing the institution's PR effectiveness and further solidifying its relationships with stakeholders. By continuing to adapt and innovate in its PR strategies, The Polytechnic can foster even greater mutual understanding and support within the community it serves.

Recommendation

- **Enhanced Stakeholder Feedback Mechanisms:** Establish more robust and systematic feedback channels, such as regular surveys, focus groups, and town hall meetings, to gather insights from various stakeholders. This will allow the Polytechnic to better understand public perceptions and expectations, ultimately informing PR strategies that are more aligned with stakeholder needs.
- **Comprehensive Communication Training Programs:** Develop and implement training programs for staff and students focused on effective communication skills and PR practices. This will help ensure that all representatives of the Polytechnic are equipped to engage with stakeholders professionally and effectively, fostering a culture of open dialogue.
- **Diverse PR Campaigns Tailored to Specific Publics:** Create targeted PR campaigns that address the unique needs and interests of different stakeholder groups, such as students, alumni, local communities, and industry partners. By customizing messaging and outreach efforts, the Polytechnic can enhance engagement and foster a deeper mutual understanding.
- **Utilization of Emerging Digital Platforms:** Invest in the exploration and adoption of new digital communication platforms and technologies that resonate with younger and tech-savvy audiences. This includes leveraging social media, podcasts, and interactive webinars to reach a broader audience and facilitate real-time engagement.
- **Longitudinal Studies on Public Perception:** Conduct longitudinal studies to track changes in public perception over time regarding the Polytechnic's PR initiatives. This research can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of implemented strategies and help identify areas needing improvement, thereby fostering continuous enhancement in PR practices.
- **Collaboration with External PR Experts:** Engage external PR consultants or experts to conduct workshops and evaluations of current PR strategies. Their insights can help the Polytechnic identify best practices and innovative approaches that may not be currently employed, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of its public relations efforts.

Implementing these recommendations will not only help The Polytechnic Ibadan address existing gaps in its PR strategies but also strengthen the relationship between the institution and its diverse publics, fostering a more collaborative and mutually beneficial environment.

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