
Relevance of Corporate Reputation Management Practice in The University of Calabar, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: *With stiff competition inherent in corporate world and attempt to stay clean at all times making an institution the stakeholders' choice, corporate reputation management becomes vital. For institutions such as university, reputation is influenced by sets of variables like student experiences, student selection, faculty attraction, stakeholder knowledge, and university valuation. Also, it's quality of education, research activity, and social responsibility. This study therefore, examined the place of corporate reputation management at the University of Calabar, Nigeria. Findings described the university's reputation and public relations services rendered by the university as average for corporate reputation and not so good for the university public relation. The study suggested that if the quality of academic staff, quality of academic programmes, quality of students and infrastructure are improved, it will boost the reputation of the university.*

KEYWORDS: Corporate reputation, Institution, Image, Management practice, Public relations

INTRODUCTION

The business environment has become increasingly complex, with corporate organizations under social scrutiny to align with and retain loyalty from the public. Corporate reputation management

is a crucial tool for organizations to align with the goodwill of the public, as tolerance for corporate malfeasance has dropped. Corporate reputation therefore, is the opinion that the public has of a company. It encompasses everything from the company's ethics and values to its products and customer service. Ali, Ali, Grigore, Molewoth and Jin (2019) explain that corporate reputation is one of a company's important intangible resources and is even regarded as the most important for businesses. Transparency and authenticity are essential for organizations, making it difficult to conceal negative news. In the knowledge-based economy, healthy relationship has become a key asset for organizations to manage, enabling sustainable competitive advantages and wealth creation. Corporate reputation management aims to align corporate communications with an organization's identity, character, personality, actions, and inactions as viewed by its public. For long-term success, public relations must be based on fact, trust, and truth. These mechanisms will clearly express the leadership's commitment to protect the reputation assets of the institution.

In the process of legitimization, stakeholders' opinions of an organization, its past acts, and assessments of its performance are all contributing factors to its reputation, which is now being recognized as a collection of traits and qualities (Miotto et al., 2020; Mateus & Acosta 2022). In other words, it is the sum total of organization's activities aimed at properly and favourably positioning itself before its publics. According to Rindova et al. (2005), reputation in the context of universities is the culmination of stakeholders' perceptions from their interactions and communications with the institution; as such, it is evaluative and represents opinions held by consensus.

Munyoro and Magada (2016) report a gap in the public sector's adoption and understanding of corporate reputation management, even though it is crucial for the sustainability of public organizations. Similarly, Waeraas and Moshe (2012) identified gaps in the literature on corporate reputation management in the public sector. This is true even though the majority of public sector institutions globally have a reputation for consistently providing subpar services, being poorly managed, and engaging in unethical behavior, among other things.

Reputation to universities is vital because it constitute as a tool to create uniqueness and competitive advantage in the competitive educational landscape and to build a reputation that satisfies students' perception and stakeholder loyalty. The University of Calabar had recently faced criticisms over alleged unwholesome happenings and unpopular/harsh policies ranging from poor hostel accommodation, sexual harassment of female students and hundred percent increase in the school fees. These issues have degenerated to public poking and questioning of the overall integrity and general corporate image of University of Calabar and what its public relations units are doing to put the situation under control.

In light of the fact that failures in reputation management could damage a long cultivated and well-earned positive identity (Stacks 2016), the study became imperative and urgent to examine the current image rating and corporate reputation management of the University of Calabar. Furthermore, emphasis was placed on the necessity of transforming the University of Calabar's public relations department into a directorate for comprehensive public relations practice. This will enable the directorate to use contemporary public relations techniques without utilizing galoot tactics. The significance of corporate reputation management in managing the reputation of universities was investigated in this study.

Objectives of the study

- i. To evaluate public perception of University of Calabar
- ii. To ascertain policies that will help improve the institution's reputation
- iii. To identify public relations practices undertaken by University of Calabar

The Concept of Corporate Reputation

In management theory and practice, corporate reputation (CR) and associated words and concepts are getting a lot of attention. Fombrun and van Riel (1997) distinguished between several different perspectives on reputation, each with its study methodologies and definitions, including organizational, sociological, marketing, strategic, economic, and accounting perspectives (Barnett et al., 2006). Thus, Fombrun and van Riel, (1997, p.10) submitted that "A corporate reputation is a collective representation . . . It gauges a firm's relative standing both internally with employees and externally with its stakeholders . . ."

Three clusters of definitions from earlier literature were found by Barnett et al. (2006): reputation as an asset, reputation as an assessment, and reputation as a condition of awareness. Perceptions, latent perceptions, net perceptions, global perceptions, perceptual representations, and collective representations are all aspects of awareness. In this cluster, corporate reputation refers to how knowledge or emotion is conveyed about a company's existence without passing judgment on it. The assessment cluster models a firm's reputation because of observers' or stakeholders' evaluation. It includes terms like verdict, approximation, assessment, gauge, attractiveness, esteem, general regard, and judgmental opinions and beliefs. The asset cluster references reputation as something of value and significance to the firm such as intangible, financial, or economic assets.

Newburry et al. (2019) defined corporate reputation as a collective perception of the past activities and beliefs of the firm regarding its future activities. Jeffrey et al. (2019) opined that corporate reputation should be geared towards building trust and loyalty between consumers and vendors. Studies by Jeffrey et al. (2019), Rettab and Mellahi, (2019) and Hameed et al., (2021)

summarize all perceptions of the stakeholders toward a firm regarding how it will fulfil or exceed the anticipations. Also, the reputation of a firm is governed by the indicators of the marketplace regarding its behaviour, as understood by stakeholders. Thus corporate reputation in this study is viewed as public perception about an institution, company or organization that directs the relation of stakeholders with the organization.

Empirical review

Corporate reputation management has taken the frontline in public relations research. Market dynamics have created the requirement for an organization to build a digital presence which creates awareness of the existence of the organization globally. Moreover, the speed of information using social media has also occasioned the need for institutions to manage their reputation, image and identity. Dacko-Pikiewicz (2022) posits that the concept of reputation has been present in literature for only a few decades, which means that its significance and the scope of evaluation criteria are evolving, and its substantive content is affected by a rapidly changing socio-economic reality. Regardless, available relevant literatures are ample.

Munyoro and Magada (2016) defined corporate reputation management as a systematic set of strategies to predict and meet expectations, foster and manage strong relationships and engender positive feedback among all stakeholders to meet expected organizational goals. Therefore, cultivating and maintaining strong relationships with all important stakeholders is just as important to corporate reputation management as being able to control perceptions or impressions (Lloyd, 2011). This explains why Ibini Aloamaka and Onwukaegwu (2023) aver that the desire to be the best, most unique and most responsive company demonstrates the importance of identifying corporate reputation as a crucial source of competitive advantage.

According to Chevalier and Conlon (2003), an institution's reputation is rooted in a "strong tradition." Much like organizational reputation, higher education reputation develops gradually among stakeholders and necessitates an institutional dedication to excellence in research findings and educational processes (Mateus & Acosta 2022). Reputation at a university is influenced by student experiences, student selection, faculty attraction, stakeholder knowledge, and university valuation. Also, it's quality of education, research activity, and social responsibility. It also includes tangible assets, which can be challenging for small, low-funding institutions. The university's reputation is crucial in strategic planning, requiring an understanding of the factors determining it, developing a model for assessment, and managing its scientific reputation (Zyryanova et al., 2020).

It requires management and impacts internal processes, including reforms, affecting the quality of educational services. Media plays a crucial role in media management, providing a platform for stakeholders to discuss and improve the institution's reputation. As universities face competition, marketing is increasingly used to attract students, teachers, and financial resources ((Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2019; Chen & Esangbedo, 2018). Reputation is a public evaluation of a university, influenced by internal and external stakeholders. It is crucial for universities how reputation to understand how it is built and how stakeholders perceive it. However, there are inconsistencies in the conceptualization of reputation in higher education due to different rules, literature, and intangibility. Reputation is composed of multiple dimensions, including performance, product, service, leadership, governance, workplace, citizenship, and innovation. Further research is needed to understand its conceptual development, characteristics, tools, and relationships with other variables in higher education (Rashid & Mustafa 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The survey research design was employed for this study. The instrument of data collection was questionnaire through which relevant responses were gathered from the sample size of 200, consisting of staff and students of University of Calabar. Researchers purposively chose those who are knowledgeable of reputation management to address the research problems and to meet the research objectives.

The quantitative method of data analysis was adopted for this study. This method ensures that presentation and analysis of data were properly carried out using tables and simple percentages to break down the data collected from respondents into succinct information needed for the study. It provided an avenue for logical deductions to be made. SPSS 26 was also employed to carry out the analysis.

RESULTS

The study data analysis was based on responses from 198 (99%) questionnaires successfully collected out of 200 questionnaires issued.

Table 1: Public perception towards the University of Calabar?

University corporate reputation	Frequency	Percentage	University Public relation	Frequency	Percentage
Excellent	56	28.28	Excellent	48	24.24
Good	49	24.75	Good	55	27.78
Average	68	34.34	Average	45	22.73
Poor	16	8.08	Poor	23	11.61
Undecided	9	4.55	Undecided	27	13.64
Total	198	100%	Total	198	100%

Table 1 shows the public perception towards the University of Calabar. Results indicate that 56 (28.28%) of the respondents chose 'excellent', 49 (24.75%) chose 'good', 68 (34.34%) of the respondents chose 'poor' while 9 (4.55%) were undecided. Though an organization may not have it all for a good reputation, this response entails that the University has to invest in enhancing its public reputation. Furthermore, the result shows how the publics of the university view the University's Public Relations Services. The response shows that 48(24.24%) of the respondents choose 'excellent', 55(27.78%) choose 'good', 45(22.73%) choose 'average', 23(11.61%) choose 'poor' while 27(13.64%) were undecided. This response entails that the Public Relations Services needs to be enhanced for the benefit of the University and its publics.

Table 2: policies and practices to improve the institution's reputation

Areas for improvement	Frequency	Percentage	Factors that could cause negative reputation	Frequency	Percentage
Infrastructure	40	20.20	Late response to Crisis	21	10.61
Quality of Academic Staff	50	25.25	Unresolved issues	32	16.16
Quality of academic programme	44	22.22	Internet Exposure	36	18.18
Quality of Students	41	20.71	Discourteous behaviour	51	25.76
Quality of products and services	23	11.62	Strike, riots and protest	58	29.29
Total	198	100%	Total	198	100%

Table 2 show areas that need to be improved to boost the reputation of the University and factors that will cause a negative public perception about the institutions. The result shows that 40 (20.29%) opted for developing the quality of academic Staff, 44 (22.22%) opted for improving the quality of quality of academic programme, 41 (20.71%) opted for an improvement in the quality of students while 23 (11.62%) choose an improvement in the quality of products and services. The response shows that an improvement in the quality of academic staff will boost the reputation of the University.

Also, the result shows the factors that could cause negative reputation to the University. From the table, it can be deduced that 21(10.61%) of the respondents choose late response to crisis, 32(16.16%) choose unresolved issues, 36(18.18%) choose exposure through the internet, followed by discourteous behaviour among staff with 51(25.76%) while strike, riots and protest with 58(29.29%) respondents. The Implication is that the university needs to improve its

response to resolving issues especially protest and unresolved issues in faculties and units in the university.

Table 3: Polices and strategies of improving the reputation of the institution as it relates with stakeholder welfare.

University's practices for positive image	Frequency	Percentage	PR strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Stakeholder development programme	60	30.30	Utilizing the mass media	69	34.85
Rewarding Staff hard work	39	19.70	Direct contact	20	10.10
Corporate social responsibility	52	26.26	Social media	30	15.15
Cordial Staff relationship	47	23.74	SMS Service	18	9.09
			Corporate Social reasonability	61	30.81
Total	198	100%	Total	198	100%

Table 3 below shows the response gathered on the point the university is putting in place to ensure it maintains a favourable image before its public. It shows that 60(30.30%) of the respondents opted for carrying out staff and student development programmed, 39(19.70%) opted for rewarding staff hard work, 52(26.26%) opted for carrying out corporate social responsibility programmes while 47 (23.74%) choose ensuring cordial staff relationship with the publics. This implies that for an organization to maintain a favourable image before its publics. It has to carry out staff and student development programmed to improve the quality of staff and students of the institution who are the major stakeholders of the institution. Doing this will ensure a positive work ethics among staff and positive academic performance among students which will in turn bring the institution to fore amongst the major players league of academic landscape.

The Table above further represents the public relations strategies the university adopts in communicating with members of its public. The response shows 69(34.85%) of the respondents opted for the mass media. 20(10.10%) opted for direct contact. 30(15.15%) opted for social media, 18 (9.09%) opted for SMS services while 61 (30.81%) chose corporate social responsibility programmed.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Establishing a good corporate reputation requires an appropriate and effective management of the perceptions of stakeholders. It is on this note that this study became pertinent to examine the overall reputation of University of Calabar and their image management policies especially now that the institution has recently been entangled with sexual harassment from lecturers, and arbitrary jerking of tuition fee by hundred percent. The study shows that public perception towards the University of Calabar is poor. According to data gathered, 56 (28.28%) of the respondents think the institution's image is 'excellent', 49 (24.75%) believe it is just 'good', while majority 68 (34.34%) rated them 'poor'.

Findings further revealed that the university's reputation and public relations services rendered by the university as average for corporate reputation and good for the university public relation. The implication is that the public relations service rendered by the University needs to be enhance the corporate reputation of the institution and further build an excellent perception in the mind so the public. This requires upgrading the PR Units to a directorate. Looking at the concept of a perception, someone's perception towards an issue could be positive, negative or non-existent which means person can support a cause, go against or care less about it.

Moreover, the study suggested that if the quality of academic staff, quality of academic programmes, quality of students and infrastructure are improved, it will boost the reputation of the university. However, the incessant strike, riots and protest is a major contributory factor to a negative reputation to a university followed by discourteous behavior among staff, unmonitored exposure through the internet, unresolved internet issues and late response to crisis. For the university to stay reputable, it has to monitor and control these sources. This will be by a conscious step by step process of converting negative perception to positive. Considerably, through opinion sampling during staff and students congress, people's opinion can be sampled to find out grey areas and present them to the senate for such issues to be handled, to prove to the people that their views truly count. It is true that we cannot satisfy every person at the same time but when an individual's view is made to be meaningful, there is a likelihood of influencing the perception of the public.

Meanwhile, findings revealed the percentage response of respondents who are of the view that carrying out staff and student development programmes as well as carrying out corporate social responsibility programme will aid the university's effort at maintaining a favourable image before its publics. It shows that 60(30.30%) of the respondents opted for carrying out staff and student development programmed, 39(19.70%) opted for rewarding staff hard work, 52(26.26%)

opted for carrying out corporate social responsibility programmes while 47 (23.74%) choose ensuring cordial staff relationship with the publics. Although, points with low percentage response such as rewarding staff hard work and ensuring cordial staff relationship with its publics are not out of place, they should be considered as avenues to achieving a favourable corporate image for an institution. These actions will improve the quality of staff and students who are the major stakeholders of the institution, ensure positive work ethics among staff and positive academics performance among students which is an added advantage to the university.

Finally, the study revealed that the most preferred strategy that should be employed in relating with members of its publics is the mass media and carrying out corporate social responsibility programmes. The response rate of direct contact and utilizing SMS services has a low percentage response. This entails that the University of Calabar should utilize more of the mass media and corporate social responsibility programmes in relating with its publics. Other aspects like direct contact, social media and SMS services should not be downplayed upon because they also have their unique impact.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the corporate reputation management of the University of Calabar. Furthermore, this study supports the work of Charles Fombrun which argues that reputations are built in a planned manner by organizations taking necessary notice of the environment in which they operate. This follows that organizations build their reputation by developing practices which integrate social and economic considerations into their competitive strategies. They not only do things right; they do the right things. In doing so, they act like good citizens, they initiate policies that reflect their core values, consider the joint welfare of investors, customers and employees; that invoke concern for the development of local communities and ensure the quality and environmental soundness of their technologies, products and services.

This study refutes the work of David Finn, Dong Newsom and some other US public relations academics who pointed out that concepts such as reputation and image are not generally something that can be managed directly, but are omnipresent and the global result of a firm's or individual's behavior. They are of the view that attempting to manage one's reputation might be likened to trying to manage one's own popularity which is awkward, superficial and potentially a self-defeating endeavor.

Recommendations

- i. The tenets of TQM should be applied in managing the reputation of the institution.
- ii. The Public Relations Unit as a matter of benefit now and in the future to the institution needs to be upgraded to a Directorate empowered to carry out vulnerability audits on a regular schedule to spot out crisis prone areas within the institution on before they fully blow up.
- iii. Consciously avoid the sources of reputation risk and work with the proposed five pillars of reputation.

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