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Trends in Institutional Public Relations – The Case of University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia, U.S.A.

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Introduction

Discourse on the domain of Public Relations (PR) in Higher Education (in Nigeria) is controversial. One of the major challenges is the idea that public Universities (whether owned by the State or Federal Government) “are not for profit” organisations. Therefore, the concern about PR Practice is not usually on the front burner for the management unless of course, a crisis erupts. Apart from this, many Universities do not see the need to employ professional PR Practitioners and so may appoint a senior administrative officer who knows next to nothing about PR to act as the mouth piece of the University. This state of things is beginning to change in the face of many realities. For one, government funding for Universities, which though is on the increase, is hardly ever enough to run the affairs of the Ivory towers. In addition, the number of Private (especially Faith-based) Universities springing up is increasing thereby swelling competition. One other development is the use of webometric ranking which is used to assign positions to Universities and rate them in comparison with their local and foreign counterparts. Moreover, gone are the days when Universities were shrouded in obscurity. Now, with globalization, it is easy to track a school’s activities as most of their accomplishments and misdemeanours are laid bare to the rest of the world via the World Wide Web.

It is not unusual now to see Nigerian Universities with different slogans like First and Best (University of Ibadan) University of First Choice (University of Lagos), and so on. It is easy for an institution to pride itself as being the best or the first. However, as Centre and Jackson (1995:586) observed, “reputations are formed and reformed in people’s minds

continuously". Moreover, research shows that reputations, images, brands and other types of cognitive representations are what members of different publics think and say to each other about an organization, not something that organisations can create or manage. (Broomley 1993, Grunig & Hunt 2002) The bottom-line and one major driver behind this paper is that "corporate and institutional behaviour are under greater scrutiny than ever before"(Centre and Jackson,1995:517).

As a matter of urgency, Universities/institutions of higher learning must wake up to the realisation that the times have changed and it is no more business as usual. Like Centre and Jackson (1995:517) observed, "many business leaders still fail to understand that the license to operate is now obtained from society". The truth then is that the issue of reputation or image of a University has gone beyond propaganda and occasional publicity in some national dailies. To be heard in the crowded market place of higher education's demand and supply, an Institutions PR programme must be strategic and professional. Like Goodman (2006) indicates, the biggest challenge facing Public Relations today include building trust with all internal and external stakeholders, managing reputation, counselling top management, or satisfying the society's demand for greater transparency as a best practice strategy for reputation management.

Before delving into the question of what Institutional Public Relations is, it might be instructive to look at what Public Relations entails. Sriramesh and Verčič (2009) offered a definition that should be useful for viewing public relations practice and scholarship in a global context, they say;

Public relations is the strategic communication that different types of organisations use for establishing and maintaining symbiotic relationships with relevant publics many of whom are increasingly becoming culturally diverse.

The classical definition by Rex Harlow, a respected PR practitioner is also;

public Relation is a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual, lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organisation and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on, and responsive to, public opinion; defines and emphasises the responsibility of management to serve public interest; helps management to keep abreast of and effectively utilize change; serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound ethical communication techniques as its principal tool.

This definition is as classic as it is instructive although some scholars have criticised it for being cumbersome. It came out of an attempt by Rex Harlow to synthesize 472 definitions. (Harrison, 2003:3) It gives a comprehensive view of all that is expected of a Public relations unit of any organization. Another popular definition of Public Relations given by Cutlip, Centre and Broom (2006:5) sees PR as “the management function that identifies, establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the various publics on whom its success or failures depend.” The question may then be asked, what is the summary of the roles PR plays in an organisation especially in an institution of higher learning? According to Black(1990), the roles played by Public Relations include counselling, analysing future trends and predicting their consequences, researching public opinions, attitudes and expectation and advising on necessary action, establishing and maintaining two-way communication with internal and external publics, anticipating and preventing conflicts and misunderstandings, promoting goodwill with staff, suppliers and customers, attracting good personnel and reducing labour turnover, promoting products or service and projecting a corporate identity.

We must be quick to point out that effective PR is not a substitute for good performance. Thus, it has been observed that more often than not, PR has exposed the intrinsic weaknesses in corporations where good performance

was not a priority. Also, worthy of note is the need for all public relations activities to be based on truth and supply of full information, on a continuing basis. In short, Public Relations should

1. Increase public awareness about an organisation.
2. Correct misimpressions.
3. Project truth.
4. Establish corporate links.
5. Enhance employee morale.

Looking at the foregoing submissions about what public relations is meant to accomplish, it may be important for one to ask how many institutions of higher learning in Nigeria can claim to be involved in any form of structured PR activity? Kowalski (2011) points out that “ most universities in Central Europe have started to apply common marketing techniques and activities including brand management and customer relations”. This is very much unlike what happens in most Nigerian Universities where tertiary institution PR is more like an appendage of the central institutional management. A similar view is expressed by Darkoaa and Adu-Oppong (2015) who observe that:

contrary to what exist in the USA, Public Relations practice in Ghanaian educational institutions are founded on disseminations of information usually coming from management of which the Public Relations practitioner is not part. A Public Relations Practitioner reports through a bureaucratic process as he or she is not accorded management status. In the case of University of Educations, the Public Relations officer report through the Registrar to the Vice Chancellor.

It is not as if management of tertiary institutions in Nigeria do not recognise the importance of public relations. There is no negotiating the role and importance of Institutional PR. This is evident in the fact that they all have units which bear this tag. Like (Kowalski,2011) pointed out,

Today, the modern practice of school PR extends well beyond persuasion techniques. Accessing information in a timely manner, exchanging information, empowering decision makers, identifying and solving organizational

problems, and serving the community's interests exemplify objectives that have evolved over time.

What in essence does Institutional Public Relations (IPR) involve? Most definitions of IPR point in the direction of strategic communication. For instance, Kotler and Fox (1995) see Institutional Public Relations as analysis, planning, implementation and control of carefully formulated programme designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of value with target markets to achieve institutional objectives.

Hence, the business of IPR is an engaging one which is pro-active rather than reactive. In addition, Parameweran and Glowacka (1995) in their study of University image found that higher educational institutions need to maintain or develop a distinct image to create a competitive advantage in an increasingly competitive market. This issue becomes more relevant in a country like Nigeria with 36 Federal Universities, 37 State Universities, 38 Private Universities and several more waiting on the National Universities Commission (NUC) to issue their licences to operate. It is not like it used to be when most Nigerians knew the first generation Universities offhand. Now, at the mention of the names of some new generation Universities, people may raise their brows and say "come again, is that a University or Private Secondary School?" The focus of IPR should then be on giving a University strong presence in the face of institutional multiplicity and lack of distinctiveness. The image portrayed by Institutions of Higher learning plays a critical role in the attitudes of the institutions' publics towards it. (Landrum et al 1998, Yaras and Shemwell 1996). In his analysis, Kirp (2004) observed that "the institutional brand is synonymous with its reputation and this is regarded as a prized asset by most prestigious higher education institution". With Universities springing up almost by the day, the general public is beginning to lose regards for some of the Institutions of Higher Learning and they often deride them by referring to them as "glorified secondary schools".

The Public relations activities of a school or college start with the Vice Chancellor. He is the chief PRO of the University. (Wilcox and Cameron,

2010:556). Many scholars advocate that a prerequisite for strategic communication and image making for higher institutions is for the Public Relations Department to be involved in decision making. PR can only make long term contributions to organisational effectiveness when it is strategic in its operations and when Public relations managers have ready access to top management. In other words, when Public Relations activities are tied to an institution's overall objectives, this will lead to strategic PR or what is known as the management concept of Public Relations. Thus, the head of the Public Relations department is not merely informed about decisions taken concerning the University after the fact. For best practice, PR Executives must be part of management or be involved in decision making or have ready access to top management. This is necessary if the institution wants the PR Executives to build stable, open and trusting relationships with strategic constituencies. However, the PR Executive can only aspire to this level of influence if "he is highly skilled and experienced in environmental business management, organisational behaviour and interactive communication" (Oliver 2008:5). Hence, much as the PR Executive is not saddled with having to take final decisions, management expects him to be on point as far as PR activities are involved. He is expected to be on hand to give direction on the way to go when there is need to take some strategic business decisions.

In fact, PR Practitioners decry what they call a "high level of encroachment by educators into the Public Relation function". Dozier and Lanze in Caywood (1997:440) defined encroachment as the assignment of professionals from outside PR to manage Public relations functions. What happens is that some Universities, in a bid to satisfy the demands to involve the PR Executive in decision making go on to appoint an academic staff (preferably a professor with a background in the Humanities) who has no professional training in PR to head the Public Relations unit. What then happens is a spurious attempt which creates a mound of ill-designed, poorly executed activities which do more to dent the corporate image of the University than to build it. Such institutions experience many challenges with media relations, issues management, students' unrest, civil disorder among staff, abandonment by Alumni Association and general chaos. Truth be told, being a savvy administrator is not enough preparation for some of the demands of PR, especially in a

crisis situation. There is only so much that emotional and cultural intelligence can do in the face of communication breakdown. Getting a professional to run the PR Department is just one of the many prerequisites for effective IPR. One other determinant of success in Strategic Communication is a lucid identification of an Institutions Publics. This paper will now attempt an identification of a University's many publics.

The Publics of a Higher Institution of Learning

Recognition of who the publics of an organisation are is "the first step to tailoring messages to their specific needs and peculiarities." Once the Public Relations Executive identifies the strategic publics, s/he then can focus on developing appropriate communication programmes with the goal of building long-term relationships with the identified groups. Grunig's (1997) situational theory of publics identifies active, passive and latent publics. Some other scholars see publics as stakeholders who are further described "broad categories of people who might be affected by management decision or who might affect these decisions". To them, "when a strategic PR Manager scans the environment, therefore, his or her first step should be to think broadly in terms of stakeholders categories. The submission by Harrison (2003;5) takes the discussion a step further by referring to an organisation's publics as "all those group of people with which it is, ought to be or wants to be in communication". On the list are suppliers, customers, competitors, neighbours and investors. Every organisation exists in a society or people environment, so building and maintaining positive working relationship within and outside an organisation is very important. It is noteworthy that an individual may be a member of two or more publics.

In a similar view, Centre and Jackson (1995) observe that in order to achieve its objectives, an organisation must be able to get the cooperation of people both inside and outside its operations. Thus, the PR publics of an Institutional of Higher learning will include but are not limited to the following;

- Students
- Affiliate Institutions and other Institutions

- Research Institutes (for instance for University of Ibadan, the related research institutes would be IITA, CRIN, FRIN, NIHORT, NISER)
- Employees, prospective employees and retired employees
- Local, State, and Federal Government (Community members and Leaders)
- International Organisations
- Investors-Industry, General Business and Professional Associations
- Donors, NGO's, Philanthropists and Alumni
- Employers of Labour
- Vendors and Suppliers
- Financial Institutions
- Media Houses
- Environmental Interest Groups
- Unions and Labour Interest

Using Nigerian Universities as an example, Ajala (2005: 231) gave the following as the publics of a Higher Institution –Students, Lecturers, Administrative Staff and their Unions at local and National levels, Parents, Alumni, Potential Students, Potential employers of graduates, Government-Federal, State and Local ,Legislators, Research councils, Education Funding Bodies, Examination Boards-JAMB, WAEC AND NECO, Potential donors, philanthropists, industry, commerce and the professionals, Media personnel, NUC, Ministry of Education. Having successfully identified its various publics, the PR unit may then go on to conduct research, plan, execute and evaluate what it needs to do to move its University forward and garner goodwill from all angles.

Strategic Communication

The PR unit needs to see the University as a product and formulate strategies to help it to thrive and hold its own among its peers. Strategic Communication according to Chase (1982:1) is a constructive, pro-active, problem solving orientation which employs engaging and effective communication. Scholars believe that organisations use strategic management to “define and shape their missions”. They do this through

an interactive process with their environment. This underscores the importance of the key publics as they are central to the activities of an effective institutional PR manager. Wilcox and Cameron 2010: (154-155) define a strategy as a somewhat broad statement describing how an objective is to be achieved. A strategy provides guidelines and key messages OR themes for the overall programme and offers a rationale for the action and programmes planned. Levinson *et al* (2008: xiii) emphasize that PR is “the overall planning approach and strategy for dealing with the public”. In essence, PR itself is strategic communication. The scholars further observe that the duties of a PR executive include reputation management, publicity, communication with investors and crisis control. The authors reiterate that;

PR is human relation, it isn't merely getting your name in the paper or appearing on radio or TV. It's how you interact with and represent yourself to the world.

They maintain that PR begins as you meet your clients or are seen by others.

It's about how you treat your clients, employees and suppliers, it's virtually a full-time job that starts the moment you walk out your door each morning and continues until you say your last goodbyes each night. It's everything from how your receptionist answers the phone to how your staff present themselves. Everyone in the institution can affect the relationship with the various publics.

This may appear like an arduous task but in reality, strategic PR is about Total Quality Management (TQM). In fact, for some scholars who believe the Vice-Chancellor is the Chief PR manager, the outlook is that for institutional PR to be objective, it has to be a top management function. As it is in the case examined in this paper reflecting the practise in the University of Georgia, Athens, USA, the position of the PR Manager is reserved for no less than a Deputy Vice-Chancellor or Vice President as he is called.

Strategic IPR thrives on research. PR Professionals use research for a variety of purposes. IPR that does not depend on research is baseless. According to Wilcox and Cameron (2010:128-129) Research can be used to;

- Achieve credibility with management
- Define audiences and segment publics
- Formulate strategies
- Test messages
- Help management keep in touch
- Prevent crises
- Monitor competitors
- Sway public opinion
- Generate publicity
- Measure success

Imagine a situation where the University's PR unit recognises that they can achieve all the above stated feats by conducting research, certainly a handsome allocation will be reserved for research activities. Strategic IPR is not a one-off thing and with the aid of research, the PR Department can solve a lot of the Universities communication problems. If the University Management perceives the PR unit to be credible, then the issue of making PR a management function will be easy to tackle. If messages are tested before they are deployed, then they will be more effective and they will go a long way in achieving the objectives of the particular campaign. Effective IPR focuses on issues so as to prevent crises even in the event of unpreventable crises (natural disasters like flood) PR can still be employed to generate positive reactions from the various publics. But to be candid, many of the crises Universities experience usually take a while to brew. With periodic cutting-edge research, many of these crises will be nipped in the bud. According to Wilcox and Cameron (2010);

by developing strategies communication programmes, organisation public relations will save the organisation money by avoiding conflicts with strategic publics.

Thus, it is a win-win situation: IPR expends funds on research so as to save the university money by avoiding conflicts. Many of the court cases involving many Nigerian Universities and their core publics (especially students) could have been resolved by word of mouth communication in a friendly atmosphere with the aid of strategic communication.

Apart from research, one other important element of strategic communication is deals with presenting information that is on point. One acronym the researcher has developed for this is ACRAA meaning Accurate Current Relevant Adequate Appropriate Information. Each of the variables is important in strategic communication. Like De Santo and Game (2006) opine,

PR departments in Universities must ensure that the University presents consistent, congruent messages to its stakeholder; messages that contribute to the overall image and reputation of the University.

When IPR ensures that messages and information satisfy the publics' need to know, better relationships are ensured. The role played by PR is to manage the flow of both internal and external communication. Many times, the publics' refer to University publications when they need authentic information. A study by the American Council for the Advancement and Support of Education found out that the Newsletter of the University in a study they conducted had a readership rate of 80%. If the question is asked: Where do most people turn to for information on a university? The answer most likely will be: The University's website, its newsletter, the magazine or newspaper. Even when enquirers receive news via word-of-mouth-communication, they still search for details or verification from the web or publications. All these organs must be synthesized. The information in the Newsletter must not be at variance with that on the webpage. In addition, only designated staff should be allowed to speak on major issues so that there will be no contradictions.

Like Wilcox and Cameron (2010:154-155) point out, a PR Plan will include eight basic elements: situation, objectives, audience, strategy, tactics, calendar, budget and valuation. This suggests that PR does not

just happen. It is not supposed to be haphazard rather it is planned and strategized. Specific activities are decided upon with an audience or public in mind, within a time frame and a stipulated budget. They scholars point out that it is not sufficient to have a strategy but that there must be a plan of action or tactics for carrying out the scheme. In addition, the plan is not only executed but later evaluated to see if the strategies met the original objectives for the activity. This need for consistency and synergy is also a factor “strategic communication”. In fact, Caywood (1997:440) maintains that for “strategy to be effective, it must be consistent and harmonious with the core values of the (clients) institution. So much has been said about the internet and the world wide web but the fact remains that this trend in Institutional PR is still unfolding. Where does this new medium come into the strategic picture?

Using the Web

The web has been described as probably “the most important issues communication vehicle of the future”. Social media facilitates communication among higher education institutions and their students, staff and graduates and other publics (Eger, Egerova and Kryston, 2019). While discussing the strengths and usefulness of the web for IPR, Hangen-Horn and Neff (2008:42) point out that

it allows opportunity – twenty – four hours a day, seven days a week – for interested parties to see the facts, values, and policy positions advocated by the organisation.

Institutions of Higher Learning now use the internet and especially their web pages as means of interacting with their numerous publics. One way to harness the advantages of using the web is to “commit to being the first and the best source of information on all matters relevant to the organisation. Your web-page is the gateway to the world. If your publics have found it to be a quick and credible source of information on all your activities, then they know where to go digging for news”.

It is not that having a webpage automatically translates to being effective in using the web as an organisation’s PR vehicle. One of the requirements of strategic communication is to “create multi-dimensional communication programmes that take advantage of a wide array of

vehicles". Some Universities' webpages appear too drab and uninformative. They (rather than help the organisation) misrepresent or under-represent their institutions. A key issue here is the design of the webpage. Some leave the maintenance of the webpages in the hands of some ICT staff who have no knowledge of PR. While such people have technical knowhow, they may lack the writing skill and message crafting finesse required in PR. It is either a University employs PR people with IT skills or trains its PR people to be web savvy. On the other hand, the University may leave the IT people to handle technical details while the PR team provides content that is creatively crafted, attractive, interesting and informative.

The array of vehicles for the web would include social media, email, blogs, online video, chats, instant messages and viral marketing. The plus here is that each of the vehicles can be used to target highly segmented audiences. Another big advantage is the high level of interactivity. This means feedback can be immediate. This is useful for PR when a rumour can be refuted. It can however be problematic, when a negative response or news goes forth from the organisation. Furthermore, Hangen-Horn and Neff (2008:48) assert that "new media technology can facilitate dialogue and serve as agents of surrogacy to rekindle the type of individual relationship organisations had diligently cultivated in the past. In a similar view, Scott (2007:11) observes that "the internet has made Public Relations "public" again, after years of almost exclusive focus on (media)". The scholar argues that with the internet and the new media (using blogs, news releases and other forms of web content) organisations now communicate directly with their publics. A Nigerian University refused to updating information on its undergraduate admission during the ASUU strike of 2013. When interviewed, the admission officer said the page was not updated because admission activities were kept on hold. The researcher then pointed out to him that just saying that admission process was on hold because of the strike was news. In total agreement, the admission officer pointed out that about three false sites had sprung up while they were silent. The sites had defrauded anxious students and parents who were hungry for news and had no way of confirming the authenticity of this websites.

In short, the internet gives PR Executives opportunities like never before to communicate directly with all their publics on the minute. Since web contents can be updated quickly and specifically especially in a micro-campaign. A note of warning though, just in the same way, an error or mis-information can go viral and damage a successful corporate image built up over a long period. One wrong post can do permanent damage to an Institution's long-held favourable image. For this reason, everything going online must be scrutinised – content must be accurate, language flawless, names spelt correctly, titles rightly denoted and pictures well tagged.

Using new media makes IPR to enjoy the advantage of having two-way communication and thus establishing and maintaining online or net relations with its various publics. Scott (2007) says the trick is to avoid one way messages as the web as a primary source of information allows organisation to develop direct relationships and seek feedback. He further noticed that “the new market on the web is centered on interaction, information, education and choice (p.7). In essence, strategic PR now uses programmes which reach core publics directly. For instance, imagine putting clips about the activities or accomplishment of staff and students on Facebook and YouTube. The Alumni, parents, students, potential students, competitors and visitors all over the world will have access to this information.

Furthermore, Levinson *et al* (2008) point out that “technology has made publicity more accessible to more people because internet provides so much information and has such a broad reach. To him, strategic PR executives must communicate forcefully and fast, don't let others break your news for you. Get your news out fast and with conviction and enthusiasm. The writers further stated on that “your blog must be well written, fresh and of interest to your core readers. They must believe that they can rely on the information you provide”. In other words, when people get to your page, let their quest for information be satisfied. ‘Your brand, your business or product name is your most important asset and once you've established it, it must be protected at all cost’ (Levinson, *et al.*, 2008:263).

University of Georgia's Example of Institutional Public Relations

The researcher spent a period three months in the Public Affairs Department of the University of Georgia with the objective of understudying the Public Relations practice of the Institution. The study was made possible by a grant provided by the Staff Training and Development initiative of the University of Ibadan under the MacArthur Foundation Program. Data was collected through the survey and participant observation methods. The instrument for the survey was the indepth interview. Heads of the Public Affairs division and the various unit heads were interviewed.

The Public Relations department of UGA is known as the Public Affairs Unit. The unit is divided into five departments namely Publications, News Service, Visitors Centre, Broadcast, Video and Photography. A new addition was in the making while the researcher was there; this is the Radio and Television Department. The Public Affairs unit is headed by a vice president who is assisted by directors in the various departments. As part of my training, I spent time understudying the heads of the various units under the Public Affairs Division of University of Georgia. The Public Affairs Division has sub-divisions like Media Relations, Web Development, Public Relations Specialist, Newspaper, Broadcast, Video and Photography. All these sub-divisions operate as one and speak with one voice. Findings are presented under the headings representing the major departments or units of operation.

Publications

Publications unit is headed by Allison Huff. As director, she oversees the day to day running of the units and reports to Vice President Tom. In the first of the two interviews the researcher conducted with her, she emphasized the need for institutional backing, specifically the support of the President of the University, for the Public Affairs Unit to be able to do a thorough job. She intoned that, "the Vice-chancellor needs to empower the office and there must be a central brand". The university publications report on activities that are outstanding and groundbreaking. She talked about the need for a marketing research saying "you need to identify your various publics and find out through a marketing survey who they are and how you can best reach them with communication from the University".

The department operates under three divisions: external affairs, finance and administration. The department depends on the Provost, Faculty, Staff and Students for information on calendar, curriculum and other events. With the input of her crew of professionals, the publications unit turns out periodic publications two of which are the *Annual Report* - a yearly publication and the *Georgia Magazine*, which is a quarterly publication. The aims of the Publications are to

- a. Promote the University image
- b. Represent the University in the Public Place
- c. Produce publications that help raise friends

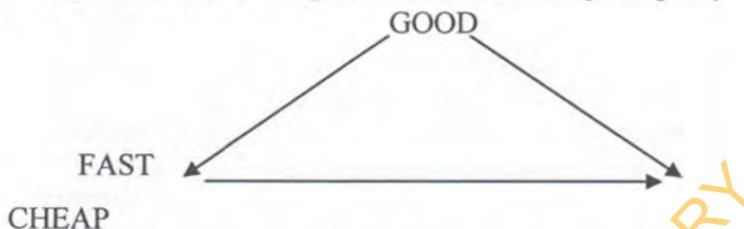
The annual report comes out once in the year in October. The University's fiscal year is from July to June. In the annual report, a list is produced of all the university benefactions during the fiscal year as well as scholarships and chairs that were awarded. In fact, the magazine is called the President's report to the donors. The annual report usually opens with a letter from the President; it is like a summation of the financial revenues and spending for the just concluded school year. In this letter, the President thanks donors and briefs them on what use their money has been put to. The circulation of the annual magazine is about 7,000 and people who are big donors get copies. Apart from donors, faculty (academic staff) who are travelling for conferences and meetings ask for extra copies and give them out to strategic people on their visits as they travel. Donors are an important segment of the publics of UGA because 70% of the University's running cost comes from donors. Since there is a reduction on state funding, the President is saddled with the task of fund raising. The University however does not target all its activities at raising just funds but at raising friends. They run a transparent account system, whereby they disclose how much comes in and how much is spent. "We want our donors to know how we spend and what we spend their money on."

The *Georgia Magazine* is one of the major news organs of UGA. Its target public are the alumni. This magazine comes out four times in the year-March, June, September and December. The circulation is about 150,000. The department operates using writers and editors who are fulltime staff. They also make use of student interns from the school of journalism as a

complement to the regular staff. Like the head of this unit reiterated, "Students are our best ambassadors". The Georgia magazine stresses what the university is achieving through its staff and students. Most departments in the University have magazines that come out once or twice a year, as well as periodic newsletters. These magazines carry good news about accomplishments of staff and students though most of such news are intended only for internal circulation. The Georgia Magazine goes a step higher than the Department based publications as it is more detailed and covers activities of the entire university. The magazine contains feature articles and a special write-up called *Classnotes*; a piece contributed by the President of the Alumni Association. *Classnotes* is popular. In fact, most people read *Classnotes* first. It contains tidbits about people who are alumni: what they are doing, current status and achievements especially professional landmarks, books written by alumni, appointments, promotions, elections and so on. In addition, a section of the magazine chronicles the alumni calendar and informs readers about what is happening where. Also, a page called "Why give?" is devoted to small donors. Here, spotlight is given to small donors and these donations may not be in cash.

Apart from the regular staff, (1 Director, 3 graphic designers and interns) who work on the production team of Georgia Magazine, the unit employs the services of a part-timer who sells advertising space. Advertising revenue pays for the production cost of one edition of the Georgia Magazine. The magazine does not feature adverts within or in between feature stories. Most of the businesses who buy advertising space in Georgia Magazine have locations and products that service the University community so they get a highly segmented audience. The advertising charges are not comparable to those of other magazines outside but clients are assured of returns on their investment in terms of message delivery to the target audience. When the editor was asked what factors the unit considers in deciding who prints their publications, her response was as follows, "we have to weigh the odds. It is a choice among at least two of the following factors: good, fast and cheap. We have to decide if we want it fast and good or cheap and good but you really can have all three together. The public affairs unit has no obligations to use the University

Printers. We allow them to bid like other privately owned printeries and we go for the best we can get in terms of cost, timing and quality”.



This factor was significant to the researcher because from some past experience working on publications for University of Ibadan, there were usually discussions on the ethics of taking printing jobs to vendors outside the University. The lesson here is that the more important consideration should be who gives good value for money. If the quality of printing your University Press offers is not adequate for your expectation, then go for a vendor outside the University who will do a better job. The publications unit also oversees the use of the University logo especially on the various publications that come out from the different departments and schools. The university has two logos, the academic logo (which is the arch in a circle) and the Super G (which is the alphabet G also in a circle). The Super G is the more popular and widely easily recognized logo but the academic logo is used more in the official capacity. When the unit head was asked which of the logos she preferred, she said “If we had to use one logo, I would go for the Super G because it is more popular and I believe having just one logo will help us to streamline our branding efforts.”

The University has quite a huge number of memorabilia that bear these two logos -fez cap, T-shirts, wrist watches, sporting gears, pens, mugs, umbrella, jackets and so on. There are licensed vendors who are allowed to produce memorabilia with the University logo. They must as a rule produce items that are of good quality which must be branded with the logo and the University colours. The Public Affairs Department does not co-ordinate the activities of the vendors but act as the University logo police. They insist that everyone who wants to use the logo must use the original logo, which they can copy from the University website. The logo

police also curb the indiscriminate use of the logo, since anything that bears the logo bears the University's image and authority.

In an interview with the head of web design, it was gathered that UGA was the first American University to go on the web. There was an attempt to do heavy marketing and the initial traffic was about 350-400 visitors a day. The web serves as an archive of the history of the University. Times and culture change and having the historical record is just as important as how many people see the records. The web is the gate way site for the University. The home page is very important. There are four columns on a page. The biggest one is for features and it is at the top of the page, and spread right across the page. Underneath this are the remaining three columns - news, events and amazing students. Three days in a week are reserved for the column "Discover UGA". The news service staff make it a point to showcase the University and attract funding. The web page is designed with these five core audiences or publics in mind:

1. Prospective and current students
2. Parents and family of Students
3. Alumni and Friends
4. Visitors and Community (Town and Gown)
5. Business and Corporations

The webpage gives each of the five publics different information based on their needs. A separate webpage is reserved for the President because he needs a place to talk to the University's publics. Here his speeches and activities are featured. Part of the education curriculum in UGA has a service component and it attracts credits. The public affairs unit helps to publicize these activities. For instance, the University helps organize programmes to alleviate poverty in Athens. The President gives a state of the University Lecture once a year; this also features on the University web. A university's web site should provide quick facts to its publics. It is a global gate way into the University so it should inform the publics about what the University is doing. The web design team works in tandem with the photography unit. This way, relevant pictures about news makers and news events are readily available. Website design is not all about posting information about the university; it should be coordinated by public

relations experts because it is about image making. Therefore, every information that goes on the webpage must add to the image of the University.

The third prominent corporate communications organ of UGA is *Columns* - The University Weekly Newspaper - headed by Juliett Dinkins. This publication is an internal release which serves faculty, staff and students. It chronicles news that mostly will interest the University's internal publics. It gives information that is not for the consumption of the general public. It features past and ongoing events. *Columns* is published weekly during the semester and twice a month during the summer break. It is usually 8 pages long, but 4 pages in the summer. The Public Affairs Department of UGA prints and circulates 10,000 copies of *Columns*.

News items for *Columns* are sourced by Strategic Communications Staff who submit press releases on past and ongoing activities and events in their respective faculties. When the editor was asked if *Columns* sources news from members of the University community, she pointed out that anyone in the community is free to send stories, ideas or short submissions but *Columns* staff still have to verify these information and report their findings. The University paper has five staff on ground who along with the "Strat Commers" generate news. When asked the key staff needed for a University newspaper to operate, Juliett Dinkins, the editor of *Columns* opined that, "Although you will need regular people who will source for news, the newspaper needs an editor, an art director and a photographer". When asked what you can do if you cannot afford to get all three staff she said, "If you can only get one, get an art director". This presupposes that an art director will be able to do some editing and shoot images but not everybody has the creative ability and skills needed for page planning and newspaper production. While talking about the kind of people needed to run a University newspaper, Juliett Dinkins pointed out that

Institutional Public Relations is about creating awareness, When Professors who are doing serious research work in their different fields get a breakthrough, we should talk about it and let people know what the

University is doing to benefit the community, the state, the nation and the world.

This echoes the view earlier expressed by the web site manager for UGA, who suggested that a whole section of the news should be devoted to what faculties are doing with their expertise and how this knowledge can be applied. She enthused that, "People should not get PhD's or do research that does not affect the lives of others in their community" The point here is that a whole lot may be committed to research and the grants may be rolling in but the publics: both internal and external of the university may remain uninformed about the activities of the University unless these activities are publicized. The editor of *Columns* went further to say "this information may be from the arts or the sciences, the duty of the University newspaper is to tell people." She emphasized that the more you can tell the better for you. Further, she highlighted some of the questions the newspaper should provide answers to, for example

- What is going on in your campus?
- What are the purposes of the on-going research and linkage programmes?
- What are the benefits to all the people concerned?
- What does the University stand to gain?
- What does the community stand to gain?
- What aspects of your university life is bringing you glory?
- What are your sports people doing?
- Are you starting a new programme?

Some of the information may have appeared on the University web page but the difference is that in *Columns*, they are usually treated as feature articles and they are accompanied with pictures. Readership survey shows that some people still prefer the paper to the online source. One faculty interviewed by the researcher expressed that he prefers the print edition to the online edition or the webpage version because the print edition runs in sections and rows so if a story continues on a different page, you will turn the page and read it while the online edition just drones on and you may not be able to match a story to a date. The editor of *Columns* pointed out that the choice of print over electronic appears to be a generational

factor. To her, “the people who have been here long prefer to read the paper as opposed to the younger people and newer staff who prefer the electronic version”.

As a parting shot, the editor commented on the need for consistency. People must know when you are coming out, only then will they expect to hear from you. *Columns* newspaper comes out once a week but the University website is available daily and it has a calendar of events both a daily and a master calendar. The editorial board of *Columns* meets once a week for a story budget, to do some planning but interact as often as possible via email and face-to-face contacts. *Columns* is funded by the University, distributed free to staff and students but sold to interested outsiders for a token. *Columns* features the contact addresses of the editorial team as well as that of the various contributors: the strategic communications staff from the various schools and colleges.

The Television Station

The TV Station was in 2011 transferred to Georgia Public Broadcasting to operate so as to provide more opportunities for research foundations and the University at large to get word out. It will henceforth operate as full-fledged Television station. The station packages educational materials mostly in form of information. They feature lectures or speeches that the public might be interested in. The broadcast station works closely with the news services department. The news releases that are used for the website and *Columns* are re-packaged in broadcast format. Take for example the story of the Gulf oil disaster in which UGA researchers played a prominent role by providing technical assistance with the clean-up, 70 TV stations aired the documentary.

Majority of the videos are for the web so they last 3-4 minutes. Materials are posted on YouTube which is a free to air outlet that enables you to post short length videos. The catch here is to remember that the attention span of the web broadcast audience is short. The focus of your broadcast materials should be on research and current affairs. If one looks around the University, one would find newsworthy people to feature. Even students come up with interesting and potentially viable research and this can be talked about. In some instances, the University plays host to notable figures in the society, people who are news worthy, for example,

Gorbachev visited UGA some years back and he was featured in a broadcast. Other events such as conferences that deal with topical issues also generate a lot of interest and are good sources of material for a University's broadcast station. Graduation ceremonies, inaugural lectures, guest lectures, valedictory lectures or matriculation lectures are also news worthy. The broadcast station is not all about research and lectures; WUGA for instance broadcasts a live music show that goes on the radio station and some local cable stations.

Public Relations and Research Reporting

Research is important to UGA and the research mission of UGA is to advance knowledge in all fields. The public will not know much about our research efforts unless we inform them. Research that is related to teaching and to economic development is newsy. Apart from these, UGA undertakes research into health issues and environmental design. It is part of the duty of the University Public Relations Unit to promote the University's research mission through every available media. The PR unit of UGA disseminates findings from research. News releases are sent to media organizations who feature such items in news environments. Media organizations enjoy a level of credibility because they carry the information as a third party. However, the media is shrinking and it is difficult getting in the traditional media. Getting into mainstream media poses just a little challenge since the University has two magazines published in house - the Alumni Magazine which is also called the University of Georgia Magazine and the research magazine which is called UGA Research. The benefit of these two magazines is that there is no filter, you are communicating with people who are already loyal to the University.

The University does a lot of fund raising and the efforts at soliciting funds are geared towards alumni, supporters, and people who have the means and also recognize the importance of higher education. The ladder of giving includes annual giving, major gifts, corporate and private organization. UGA's public relations efforts are focused more on friend raising. This is done in three ways

1. Alumni Association
2. Board of Visitors
3. Parents and Family Council

Speaking on alumni relations, Sam Fahmy said “we keep them close to us and keep them engaged. We report on their activities and further get them involved in other university events. The board of visitors shares the University’s stories with certain individuals and expects them to promote what the University does and to keep a relationship with them. We relate with parents using media conferences and news briefing. In all of these, you need to be careful what information you give out”. This again underscores the need to know your various publics and what the communication need of each group is.

Visitors Centre

Another arm of the University’s Public Affairs Unit is the Visitors Centre. It started during the 1996 Summer Olympics. It was conceived as a place for people to go in search of information about the University. The mandate of the Visitors Centre is to represent the University and give a good impression to its numerous visitors. The staffs here are often told “let no one ever come to you without leaving happier or better than they came”. The UGA Visitor’s centre runs with 4 administrative staff and 35 student workers. The publics of the Visitors Centre are prospective students and their parents, friends of the University, Donors, Public Officials, and Tourists among others.

The students who work in the visitors centre are chosen through a highly selective process. They have to be people who have extremely dynamic personalities, speaking skills and friendly disposition. The staff of the visitor’s centre conduct daily tours for visitors to the University. They do not get involved in admissions but are knowledgeable about the process because many of the visitors to the University require information on the admission process. On a rare occasion that a visitor asks for information that the staff of the visitors’ centre do not have, they let the visitors know so and then immediately seek someone who has the answer. When the unit encounters visitors who are difficult or disgruntled, they do their best to still remain pleasant and professional. To quote the Manager of the visitor’s centre, “We know that people come here sometime with travel stress, so we have to be disarming. Our goal is to see how we can make them happy”.

Apart from conducting the Campus tour, the centre displays and distributes to visitors, literature and memorabilia like the G-Book, stickers, calendar, schedules, campus map and other branded items to tell them more about the University. All the magazines published by the public affairs unit, all the literature from the various colleges and schools are available at the visitors centre for the perusal of visitors and as keepsakes. The front office of the Visitor's centre is warm and welcoming. The décor is sophisticatedly done in black and white. When a guest comes in, the student at the desk is expected to get up from his seat, smile, be hospitable and treat all callers with respect and kindness to generally make them feel at home. The workers wear University Centre Tee- Shirts and a tag that bears their names and place of origin to make introduction easier.

One commendable thing about corporate communications in University of Georgia is the harmonization and synergy exhibited across the various arms of public affairs division. All staff have one goal and one focus which is to present a positive image of the University. It is also commendable that all the employees speak with one voice and conduct their duties with a sense of commitment and dexterity. Individual roles are clearly spelt out and there is no overlap of duties. All corporate communication organs have their timeline and at every point in time, there is some publication available. There may be some kind of repetition or replication of information but this may be more for emphasis than mere repetition. Without doubt, the University is well branded and its activities are well orchestrated to its numerous publics.

Conclusion

This paper examined the trends in Institutional Public Relations by drawing examples from the practice in the University of Georgia at Athens, Georgia, U.S.A. The demands of Public Relations in Higher Education are diverse. However, as great as the demands are, the answer is to align all the organs of P.R. and work in synergy so that the University can speak with one voice and have a central, well defined image. The challenge of maintaining a good reputation with one's numerous publics is made lighter when all the organs of the University are well schooled in the art of Public Relations and when Public Relations is seen and practiced as a Management function. Apart from the need to synchronise

all the activities of the various units that will go public, this paper submits that only P.R. professionals who are duly trained and certified be saddled with the responsibility of appearing as the University's mouthpiece. It is only when these steps are taken that Institutional image making can yield favourable result.

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