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Udoudo, Aniefiok; Amaechi, Michael

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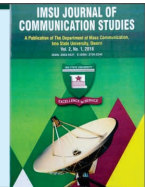
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AN ASSESSMENT OF MEDIA RELATIONS PRACTICES OF NATIONAL AGENCY FOR FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION AND CONTROL IN RIVERS STATE

UDOUDO, Aniefiok (Prof.)

AMAECHI, Michael

¹Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies
University of Port Harcourt.

²Department of Mass Communication
Clifford University, Nigeria

Corresponding author: Udoudo, Aniefiok, aniefiok.udoudo@uniport.edu.ng

Abstract

This study investigated media relations practices of National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control in Rivers State. The objectives were: to evaluate media relations programmes of the agency in Rivers State, to assess types of media used by the agency in its media relations programmes and to ascertain the extent to which media relations practices of the agency impact on the agency's relationship with media practitioners in the state. The research design adopted was survey method. Findings showed that what constituted media relations practices of NAFDAC were luncheon programmes, sharing of gift items to reporters at year end events and visits to media houses in the state. Findings further showed that there is a disconnect in the implementation of the activities arising from lack of consistency and continuity. The study also found out that the media relations practices of the agency did not influence the relationship between the agency and the mass media in the state. Based on the findings, the study recommended among others that NAFDAC should design and implement strategies that will guarantee regular interactions with the mass media in Rivers State and to explore on regular basis the use of all media platforms in the promotion of their programmes.

Keywords: Government agency, media relations, assessment, mass media, NAFDAC

Introduction

Other than ensuring the effective coverage of corporate activities and the avoidance of negative publicity, corporate organisations identify and relate with the mass media due to the strategic functions of education, sensitisation, mobilisation, status conferment and agenda setting. The performance of these functions makes the media a critical partner in the management of the society. Like other organs of the social system, corporate, organizations prioritise media relations functions not only to inform and educate, but also to enable stakeholders' participation in corporate activities, including the provision of opportunities to solving social problems.

As corporate organisations, Nigerian government agencies are not only engaged in refutation of negative publicity about their organisations. They are also engaged in relating with the media so as to have favourable coverage of their sensitisation and educative programmes in the media.

However, studies have shown that not all government agencies in Nigeria are engaged in media relations. Okon (1998) explained that Nigerian government and its agencies tend to focus more on publicity in their public relations practice. He submitted that government programmes fail as a result of

lack of public relations because publicity alone cannot effectively mobilise the citizenry. What is needed here is for government to use public relations to properly inform, educate and persuade the citizenry. One of the strategies of doing this is for government to maintain mutual relationship with the media whose primary roles are to inform, educate and entertain the public.

Pate, Abdullahi and Umar (2014) observed that the Nigerian Police Force is one agency that does not have mutual relationship with the media. The scholars pointed out that the police tend to believe that every piece of information is useful for further investigation and should therefore be treated confidentially, the journalists on the other hand are always inquisitive to obtain information and disseminate same without delay. As a result of this belief, police spokespersons sometimes deny media personnel access to certain information.

Similarly, Omeje (2019) found out that media disposition towards the military in Nigeria and vice versa has always been adversarial noting that the poor relationship existing between the military and the media reveals the poor performance of the Directorate of Army Public Relations since its inception in 1967.

In a publication of the Nation Newspaper of April 2, 2020. Temidayo, a public affairs analyst, stated that over 95% of those who responded to the question asked if National Orientation Agency still exists in Nigeria, said it has been scrapped. The reasons the respondents, gave were that if the agency is still in existence and is having mutual relationship with the media, it would have made impact in waging strategic sensitisation war against COVID-19 through the media. Mr. Temidayo reiterated that the agency has failed in making Nigerians to be better informed about the activities of government. This is because the business of the agency is left in the hands of unqualified civil servants who do not understand that media relations in government agencies and the use of communication media are important tools in achieving growth and development.

This brings to the fore the nexus between media relations, use of communication media and achievement of organisational goals. Essentially, government agencies engage in media relations practices for the purpose of achieving goals set by the government that established them. They achieve this through effective use of communication media.

Considering the strategic position health communication occupies in nation building, this study examined media relations practices of National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC). It is an agency of Nigerian Government in the Federal Ministry of Health. It regulates and controls the manufacture, importation, exportation, distribution, advertisement, sales and use of food, drugs, cosmetics, chemicals, detergents, medical devices and packaged water. The key component of the global strategy for sustainable health development through adequate information and education is mass media.

In the same vein, through the mass media, activities of NAFDAC can easily be communicated to members of the public residing in places where their operational offices are located. One of the agency's operational offices is the Corporate Headquarters located at the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja. It has six zonal offices located in the six geo-political zones in Nigeria namely: Maiduguri in North East, Kaduna in North West, Jos in North Central, Enugu in South East, Ibadan in South West and Port Harcourt in South South. There are also 37 inspectorate offices located in the 36 states of the country and the FCT. This study investigated the media relations practices of NAFDAC in Rivers State where the South South Zonal office is located.

Statement of the Problem

Over the years, the problems of fake drugs, adulterated food, acidic water and dangerous chemical substances have been serious issues in Nigeria. Some scholars have found out that they are partly instrumental to the high death rate in the country. These problems are among the reasons why the

government of Nigeria established National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC).

In line with its mandate, the agency is required to use the mass media to create public awareness and enlighten the public on the agency's activities as regards the products it regulates and their enforcements. For the target audience to benefit from this awareness and enlightenment, there has to be symbiotic relationship between the agency and the media. This relationship would engender goodwill that makes the media always available to take NAFDAC messages to the people.

The problem here is that the objectives of establishing the agency may be defeated if the agency does not relate well with the news media and consequently does not communicate its activities regularly to the general public. The resultant effect of this is that many citizens may likely wallow in ignorance. Relatively, ignorance and disease are key indicators of underdevelopment.

Also, as an agency with a national spread, the vitality and effectiveness of their media relations activities in the states are uncertain. The problem therefore is that the nature of the relationship between NAFDAC and the media in Rivers State is not known. Hitherto, what constitutes the agency's media relations practices and the impact on the relationship between the agency and media practitioners in the state is also not known.

Research Questions

1. What are the media relations programmes of NAFDAC in Rivers State?
2. What are the types of media used by NAFDAC in its media relations programmes in Rivers State?
3. To what extent do the media relations practices of NAFDAC impact on the agency's relations with media practitioners in Rivers state?

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on the Relationship Management Theory. The theory was propounded by John Ledingham in 2002. According to Ledingham (2003), "Relationship Management is the ethical and efficient management of an organisation stakeholder relationship, focused overtime, on common interests and shared goals in support of mutual understanding and mutual benefits" (P. 190).

This theory attempts to explain the partnership that exists between an organisation and its stakeholders. The partnership can only be prolonged if common interests of both parties are given priority attention. In this vein, both sides benefit because they share goals and also have mutual understanding influences the objectives, mission and goals shared by both parties involved. According to Grunig and Dozier (2002), the concept of relationship repositions public relations as a strategic management function that helps manage relationships with key publics that affect organisational mission, goals and objectives.

The relational perspective can be explored in the context of various public relations functions which include media relations. Ohiagu (2015) identifies media relations as one of the function of public relations in organisations. In other words maintaining cordial relationship with the media to forestall publicity and enhance good media coverage is an invaluable function of public relations. In this case, part of the duties of the public relations unit of organisations is to use the mass media as channels to reach their publics. This cannot be achieved in the absence of mutual relationship.

This study finds Ledingham's theory particularly relevant because it advocates for an effective and sustained management of relationship between an organisation and the media. Media relations is not ideally practicable in the absence of relationship management. Media relations practices of an organisation can be enhanced if there is effective and sustained management of relationship between it

and the media. This relationship enables the organisation to achieve her goals and objectives in relations to media campaigns. The same applies to National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control.

Concept of Media Relations

Media relations is an aspect of public relations. It occupies a key position in the activities and function of a public relation practitioner. The place of mass media is strategic to a public relations practitioner because the media serve as the bridge between any organisation and its publics. The practitioner views journalists as audience, through whom to reach the larger audience and as gate keepers representing and responding to the public's quest for knowledge.

In carrying out media relations practices certain techniques and tools are applied by public relations practitioner. The study by Nkwocha (2005) on effectiveness of media relations tools and strategies showed that the effectiveness of tools and strategies is measured by four instruments. These instruments are: high positive publicity that organisations earn from journalists and their respective media. Such publicity helps the organisations in creating awareness for their business activities, policies, programmes, products and services; low negative media reports, attacks and criticisms on organizations and their activities and projects; journalists covering organisations are being more informed and knowledgeable about their area of specialisation and coverage as part of media relations and the friendly and cordial relationship that exist between the organisations and journalists.

Ilupeju (2003), identifies the following as public relations techniques which also serve as tools for media relations practitioners; awards to journalists or media organisations, anniversary celebrations, house journals, brochures, facility visits, exhibitions, sponsorship, patronage and endorsement. Nkwocha (2005), similarly posited that the above tools, including press luncheon, parties and receptions, social welfare packages and periodic stipends for journalists who cover the activities of the organisation and press information kits containing corporate information and pictures contribute to maximum publicity and mutual relationship between organisations and media practitioners.

Sommers (2009) describes media relations as “development and maintenance of effective communication with representatives of the print and broadcast media in order to facilitate the flow of information to the public by explaining programmes; and activities; answering media inquiries; and supplying feature background and current information” (p.4). Through constant communication with the media organisations, they get their publics acquainted with their programmes and activities. In this way, media relations becomes the chief source through which public relations practitioners achieve the purpose of reaching their publics.

Nwosu (2005) opined that media relations is not merely a means of reaching the publics of an organization. It is also a strategic public relations function which establishes and maintains mutual understanding, goodwill, cooperation, and support between an organisation and the mass media practitioners. The aim of this relationship is hinged on achieving maximum positive publicity, media support, as well as other well defined corporate and public relations objectives. Media relations exists to facilitate mutual cooperation between an organisation and the media.

This cooperation entails sending information from the organisation to the media while the media reciprocate by generating news from such information. In this vein, Rodman (2012), stated that media relations is part of the art of news management which involves “the practice of developing and maintaining contact with reporters” (p. 344).

Empirical Review

Many researchers have carried out empirical studies on the practices of NAFDAC with respect to its regulatory mandate in Nigeria. To this researcher's best knowledge, these studies had little or no focus on media relations practices of the agency. Chinwendu(2007) carried out a study on "the fight against fake drugs by NAFDAC in Nigeria" with the objectives to assess and analyse the work of the agency in fighting fake drugs within the legal drug supply system in Nigeria, to identify the strength and weaknesses of NAFDAC as the drug regulating agency in Nigeria, etc.

The study found out among others the following: that NAFDAC: collaborates with other relevant stakeholders such as National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), Standard Organisation of Nigeria (SON), police, customs, port authorities, etc, as contained in the enabling decree to liaise with relevant stakeholders both outside and within the country that can help in the goal of fighting fake drugs. That some of the stakeholders do not give full cooperation at the time of need; that NAFDAC publishes regularly list of identified fake/substandard products in NAFDAC quarterly bulletin and in the newspaper for the public to know; that agency organises seminars and workshops for small, medium and high enterprises to explain NAFDAC guidelines and what is expected from them and campaigns are often rural dwellers that might have little, or no access to information. The study recommended that NAFDAC should develop better strategies in promoting public awareness since the drug fakers have turned out to be very sophisticated in their activities making it more difficult to differentiate originals from fake. It also recommended that NAFDAC should collaborate with other drug agencies and stakeholders when necessary to assist the agency during certain activities.

Having found out that full cooperation of some stakeholders is still lacking inspite of NAFDAC's collaboration with relevant stakeholders in the fight against fake drugs, it becomes imperative to ask if actually the agency relates closely with these stakeholders. A gap is hereby created in this aspect, the study was silent about NAFDAC activities with respect to its relationship with stakeholders. The position of the media as veritable instruments for behavioural change through their education and informative function makes them relevant stakeholders of NAFDAC. Public health communication campaign is associated with deliberate attempts to inform or influence behaviours in large audiences within a specified time period using an organised set of communication activities and featuring of mediated messages in multiple channels for the benefits of individuals and the society in general. To achieve the goal of any health communication campaign, the role of the mass media cannot be overemphasized. Having a mutual relationship with the media may likely be a panacea for achieving health communication campaign such as the one NAFDAC carries out against counterfeit drugs. This study therefore took a look at the media relations practices of NAFDAC in Rivers State.

Another study was also carried out by Egbulefu (2015) on 'The place of public relations in NAFDAC operations'. The objectives of the study were to investigate the impact of NAFDAC's public relations activities and to ascertain the agency's commitment to public relations management. The study was anchored on the corporate social responsibility theory. Survey research design was adopted with a sample size of 250 respondents.

Findings of the study showed that NAFDAC has benefitted immensely from its public relations functions in terms of improved stakeholder relations and wider acceptance of the agency's service. This is based on goodwill. The study found out that the Public Relations Department of NAFDAC enjoys the support of management of the agency in terms of approval and sponsorship of the programmes of the directorate, especially programmes that are targeted at reputation management, publicity and media relations. Among other things, the study recommended that NAFDAC should sustain its investment in public relations management in order to maintain a favourable rapport with relevant stakeholders.

The above study revealed that the management of NAFDAC sponsors media relations programmes of the agency in order to maintain mutual relationship with relevant stakeholders which include the media.

However, what constitutes these media relations programmes of the agency were not revealed by the study. This current study fills this gap especially with regards to the agency's operations in Rivers State.

Methodology

Survey method was applied in this study. Survey was adopted because it can be used to investigate problems in real settings. Media relations practices of NAFDAC in Rivers State can be examined where and how they happen rather than in a laboratory or selected room under artificial conditions. Using purposive sampling technique, 18 journalists were selected from 500 registered members of Nigeria Union of Journalists in Rivers State. They were chosen because they specially produce or report news about NAFDAC or health sector for their media organisations. The 18 journalists were derived from five public media organisations and five private media organisations in the state.

The following are the media organisations and the number of journalists from each of them: two journalists from Radio Rivers, three from Treasure FM, three from Nigeria Info Port Harcourt, three from Nigerian Television Authority, two from Rivers State Television, one each from Africa Independent Television, Raypower, Rhythm, The Tide Newspaper and Port Harcourt Plain Truth Newspaper, all in Port Harcourt making, it 18 journalists. One of the criteria used for choosing these media organisation is that each of them has specific correspondent(s) specially assigned to cover health stories. Moreso, the media organisations have been operating actively for a long time in the state.

Using the same purposive sampling method, only staff in the Public Relations and Management Units of the agency in Port Harcourt were selected. These are the Zonal Public Relations Officer, the Zonal Director and the Rivers State Coordinator. The 18 journalists and three NAFDAC staff brought the sample to 21 respondents.

The instruments for the study were interview and Focus Group Discussion. An interview guide was structured to help get responses from NAFDAC staff on the nature of the media relations programmes of the agency in Rivers State, and the types of media used by the agency in its media relations programmes in the state

Focus Group Discussion was used to elicit information from the 18 journalists. To do this, three groups of six discussants were engaged at different locations this was considered appropriate following Wimmer and Dominick (2006) view "that a sample of 6 and 12 will be enough for a Focus Group Discussion" (p. 45). The three journalists from NTA Port Harcourt were combined with the three journalists from Treasure FM to form a discussion group. The venue for the first group was the Newsroom of Treasure FM. The two journalists from AIT and Raypower, the one from PH Plain Truth Newspaper and Nigeria Info PH were combined to form another group. The newsroom of Nigeria Info PH was chosen as venue. The last discussion group consisted of the two journalists from Rivers State Television two from Radio Rivers and one each from Rhythm FM and the Tide Newspaper respectively. The Nigerian Union of Journalist (NUJ) secretariat Rivers State Newspaper Corporation chapter was the venue for this group. Proximity and centrality were considered in the choice of venues for the discussion groups. Qualitative data generated from this study were analyzed using textual analysis method.

Data Presentation and Analysis

RQ 1: What are the Media Relations Programmes of NAFDAC in Rivers State?

Asked what constituted the media relation programmes of NAFDAC in Rivers State, the Public Relations Officer of the agency South-South Zone stated that invitation of some reporters to luncheon programme is one of the media relations programmes of NAFDAC in the state. He explained that the programme is organised by the agency in designated venues in Port Harcourt on few occasions. The event, according to him, accords the agency the opportunity to acquaint reporters with its activities in

Rivers State. This response is in line with the responses given by the Zonal Director and the Rivers State coordinator of the agency on the media relations practices of the agency in the state.

Distribution of gift items especially bags of rice to reporters at the end of the year was also identified as part of the media relations practices of the agency in Rivers State. In three separate interviews, the Public Relations Officer, the Director and the State Coordinator of the agency affirmed that the agency presents gift items to some reporters from selected news media organisations in the state as a way of appreciating them for coverage of NAFDAC activities.

The interviewees all agreed that as part of NAFDAC's media relations practices in Rivers State, they invite the press to cover their enforcement works in the field especially when they are clamping down on fake drug dealers and substandard water factory owners. Explaining further, they stated that they also invite the press to cover their sensitization workshop for Patent Medicine Store Dealers and Association of Table Water Producers.

RQ. 2: What Are the Types of Media Used by NAFDAC in its Media Relations Programmes in Rivers State?

On the types of media mostly used by NAFDAC in its media relations programmes in Rivers State, the interviewees identified radio as the major type of media used by NAFDAC in the state. They also agreed that this is followed by television. According to them, these forms of media are mostly used by the agency because they have audience that cut across different categories of people. They affirmed that radio and television have been very effective in dissemination of information about NAFDAC activities in the state. They unanimously agreed that radio is mostly used by the agency because they believe that so many people in Rivers State have access to radio and also make use of it more than other media forms. On the other hand, they explained that television has been useful to the agency because it enhances people's believability in the operations of the agency in the state. This is made possible by its audio-visual attributes.

RQ 3: To What Extent Do the Media Relations Practices of NAFDAC Impact on The Agency's Relations with Media Practitioners in Rivers State?

A Focus Group Discussion FGD was held in three venues with six journalists in each group drawn from the selected media organizations. The objectives of the FGD were to assess media relations programmes of NAFDAC in Rivers State and to ascertain the extent of the impact on the agency's relations with media practitioners in Rivers State.

The FGD described the media relations practices of NAFDAC in Rivers State as very poor. The discussants unanimously lamented that media organisations in Rivers State have not really felt the impact of media relations activities of NAFDAC in the state. Many of them identified the following as the only media related activities they know the agency carries out in the state: invitation of few media houses to cover their sensitization meetings with their stakeholders; invitation of reporters when they conduct raids on markets, fake drug dealers, factories, etc. They explained that NAFDAC in Rivers State has always stressed that there are certain responsibilities that are not within the purview of the operations of NAFDAC at state and zonal levels. Such are the exclusive reserve of the national headquarters of the agency at Abuja. The discussants identified unfriendliness of NAFDAC management in Rivers State with the media and over-centralisation of power and authority at the national headquarters as perhaps the major factors affecting the media relations practices of the agency in the state.

However, some discussants argued that even though NAFDAC in Rivers State does not carry out media relations activities in the current dispensation, there were times in the past when the agency was engaged in one media relations activity or another. This, they pointed out was during the tenure of the immediate past State Co-ordinator and the time late Prof. Dora Akunyili served as Director General. They

affirmed that the engagement of NAFDAC in media relations practices depends on whether the administrative head within a particular period at state, zonal or national level is media friendly or not.

To ascertain the extent to which media relations practices of NAFDAC impact on the agency's relations with media practitioners in Rivers State, the FGD affirmed that the relationship NAFDAC and media practitioners in the state is not cordial. That the so-called media relations practices of the agency do not have any positive impact on their relationship with the agency. They however, pointed out that if NAFDAC in ideal sense carries out good media relations practices consistently, surely the effort will translate to mutual relationship.

The FGD also stated that if NAFDAC partners with media practitioner properly, the agency will surely enjoy favourable coverage of their programmes in the media and that if such programmes attract commercials, the agency may not be charged by their media organisations. They stressed that mutual relationships cannot really be established between persons if there is no close contact between the person involved. This, according to them, is the nature of the relationship between media practitioners in Rivers State and NAFDAC.

Discussion of Findings

Findings from data analyzed revealed that NAFDAC in Rivers State engages in three key media relations programmes as a strategy to maintain mutual relationship with the mass media in Rivers State. This is consistent with the ideals of relationship management theory which advocates for partnership between organisations and stakeholders. The finding is also in tandem with the finding of Chinwendu (2007) that NAFDAC collaborates with other relevant stakeholders in its fight against fake drugs. These media relations programme are; organisation of luncheon programmes where some reporters are invited to interact with NADFAC officials, distribution of gift items to reporters at the end of the year on few occasions and invitation of the press to cover their enforcement activities in the field.

Also, the findings equally revealed that the type of media mostly used by NAFDAC in its media relations programmes in Rivers State are radio and television. The former is used more often than the latter. However, both have been very effective in dissemination of information about NAFDAC activities in Rivers State. In line with this finding, Egbulefu (2015) discovered in his study that the Public Relations Unit of NAFDAC encourages media relations programmes which apparently can lead to the use of the mass media for coverage or publicity of NAFDAC activities.

Findings further revealed that the media relations practices of NAFDAC have very little impact on the agency's relations with media practitioners in Rivers State. Consequently, the relationship between both is not cordial. This is attributed to inconsistency and lack of sustenance of the media relations programmes of the agency. Relationship management theory requires effective and sustained management of relationships between an organisation and the media. This finding therefore implies that there are rooms for improvement in the media relations strategies of NAFDAC in Rivers State.

Conclusion

From the findings of this study, what constitutes media relations practices of National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control Rivers State are: invitation of reporters to luncheon programmes, sharing of gift items during end of year activities and visits to media houses. This activities are not carried out regularly and do not characterize the current operations of the agency in Rivers State. Consequently, the media relations practices do not impact on the relationship between the agency and the mass media in the state. It can be concluded therefore that NAFDAC in Rivers State has poor approach to media relations. This is evident from the points raised by media practitioners in the state. It can also be concluded that the agency prefers using radio and television to newspapers, magazines and other media platforms. These preferred media are not used regularly in promoting its health programmes.

Recommendations

In line with the findings, the following recommendations are hereby made:

1. National Agency for Food and Drugs Administration and Control should design strategies that will guarantee the implementation of regular, robust and dynamic media relations practices by successive administration at all levels of the agency;
2. The agency should explore on regular basis, the use of all traditional media as well as new media in promoting its health programmes;
3. The management of NAFDAC in Rivers State should view mutual relationship with the media as panacea to earn favourable and regular coverage of NAFDAC's activities in the media. This should be done by partnering with the media practitioners in the agency's programmes to improve their relationship.

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