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Public Relations as a Strategic Management Function in Selected Organizations in Accra, Ghana

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Abstract

It is often advocated that, in order to realize its full potential, public relations should be an integral part of strategic management decision-making in organizations. Some experts have backed this advocacy with the argument that public relations (PR) professionals' skills of interpretation and counseling place them in a position to make a significant contribution to strategy in organizations. The goal of this research was to investigate whether PR practitioners play a strategic management role in selected organizations and to find out how practitioners contribute to organizational objectives, goals, strategies and policies. It also investigated the challenges militating against the effective practice of PR as a management function in selected organizations, as well as the perceptions top managers have about the role PR plays in the overall success of organizations. The study used the qualitative descriptive approach. In all, eight PR practitioners and three top-level managers from insurance, manufacturing, construction and a public institution were interviewed. Data was later transcribed and thematically analyzed. The results showed that PR was instituted as a top-management function in one organization but as a middle-level management function in the three other organizations. However, all PR practitioners participated in organizational decision-making. The study also found that the barriers that prevented the effective institution of PR as a stand-alone department and as a top-management function in the organizations studied were: misconceptions about PR, the size of the organization, the mission of the organization as a barrier and the personal capabilities of the PR practitioner. Top managers interviewed exhibited an understanding of the PR function and considered it as key to organizational success. Practitioners could, thus, ride on this to gain the attention and the positions they want in their organizations. The study recommends that there be constant evaluation of PR activities to provide evidence for the value PR brings to organizations.

Keywords: Public Relations; Strategic Management; PR as a Management Function; Strategic public relations; PR in practice

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Introduction

The sustainability of an organization depends on numerous factors, ranging from fighting off competition to satisfying stakeholders. To achieve this, organizations must be credible, innovative, up to date with information, socially responsive and socially responsible. Public relations (PR) practitioners in organizations can provide the needed strategic direction to achieve these, while making sure their programs are also aligned to organizations' missions. Davis (2004) contends that PR's unique function is to satisfy the various needs and interests of all stakeholders of the organization it represents and that of the organization itself. PR is "the management of communication between an organization and its publics" (Grunig and Hunt 1984, 6). The growth of contemporary PR practice coincided with the golden age of mass communication (Macnamara and Lively 2017), when a lot of attention was given to information processing. For this reason, the practice of PR has been largely seen as a communicative function rather than a strategic management function. However, PR is an influential management tool "if approached with strategic integrity, alignment and focus" (Shamsan and Otieno 2015, 504).

Macnamara and Lively (2017) hold that PR is a measurable, strategic communications activity. PR practitioners, with their knowledge and skills, strategically develop and maintain relationships with the stakeholders (publics) of an organization for the benefit of both the organization and the identified publics. Practitioners can, equally, contribute to overall management strategy by proposing programs and campaigns that will put the company in a positive light, which will ultimately yield dividends in good corporate image and profitability. By effectively taking up that role, the organization is sure to remain competitive, as those stakeholders remain more confident in the organization and what it stands for. This is because PR strategies are usually aligned with an "organization's vision, mission, corporate culture, policies and strategies" (Shamsan and Otieno 2015, 504).

PR has become a potent instrument for organizations to build and communicate their image to their publics (Shamsan and Otieno 2015). PR professionals play diverse roles when working towards organizational goals and decision-making (Makkanen 2016). It has often been advocated that, in order to benefit from and to realize its full potential, public relations should be an integral part of strategic management decisions. PR professionals, Gregory (2004) underscores, can make significant contributions to strategy by using their skills of interpretation and counseling. According to Shamsan and Otieno (2015), from the strategic management viewpoint, for the PR function to be effective, practitioners must be part of strategic management and manage their programs strategically. This, they believe, will help practitioners develop good relationships with stakeholders, thereby contributing to the mission and objectives of organizations. They admit, however, that the PR role has not been well recognized in strategic management. Therefore, it is important for owners and top managers of organizations to recognize the strategic management function of PR so as to tap into this specialized function and also place it at the level at which it is supposed to be – top-level management.

The role of PR in the success and survival of an organization should no longer be a debate in contemporary times. However, the question that lingers on is which level of management PR belongs to and the rationale behind that. According to Dolphin and Fan (2000) the two specific constraints that face a PR practitioner are the source of responsibility he/she possesses and to whom he/she reports. As a profession that has neither a universally accepted definition nor a unified title for the person who holds the office, resulting in various given titles such as "corporate affairs," "corporate communications" and "public affairs" (Dolphin and Fan 2000), PR is most likely to face such uncertainties. That is why there is a need to agree on what PR practice is and how it functions, including its theoretical foundations (Ferguson 2018), in order for practitioners to function well and be positioned properly on the organizational ladder.

One of the reasons management fails to appreciate the need to place the PR function at the management level is the inability to concretely determine what and how that function contributes to the realization of organizational outcomes. And this comes about as a result of the practitioners not being able to show results for what they do. The inability to show results is due to the widely held misconception that PR programs do not rake in financial returns. Also, mostly, there is no commonly agreed benchmark for evaluating PR programs, which gives rise to the likelihood of its function and role in organizations being downplayed. Macnamara and Lively (2017) suggest that in early practice, although Edward Bernays and others advocated the need to evaluate PR activities, its growth with that of the practice of mass communications put its evaluation on the backburner. There was rather concentrated attention on awareness programs or campaigns

(essentially communicating). It was when public opinion research became critical to PR programs that practitioners started paying attention to evaluation (Macnamara and Likely 2017).

Currently, in a lot of corporations, PR practitioners have been hired to play various roles. It is important to establish whether they are playing roles that make their function that of a strategic management communications function. The goal of this research was to find out whether PR plays a strategic management role in selected organizations and to establish how exactly practitioners contribute to organizational objectives, goals and policies. The study also explored the perception of top non-PR-practicing managers about the contribution of PR to organizational strategy and overall success. The objectives of the study are informed by the advocacy by authorities in PR research, such as James Grunig, that PR be made a management function and not be merely viewed as a communication function.

Problem Statement

Olkkonen and Luoma-aho (2019) conceptualize PR as an expectation-management function. They submit that it is a managerial function because it strategically meets stakeholder expectations through stakeholders' direct and indirect encounters with an organization's services and brands to the point that when expectations are not met the organization's relationship with stakeholders and its reputation suffers. "While research has proven that most organizations now recognize the importance of PR and featuring it as a managerial function, others are yet to appreciate the role, position and benefits of PR within their organizations (Rawjee, Veerasamy and Gqamane 2012). For some, PR does even not feature at all in their organizational structure. It is also often misunderstood (Dolphin and Fan 2000). This implies that, largely, PR is not regarded as an integral part of, and contributor to, the success of these organizations (Rawjee et al. 2012). The contribution of communication continues to be centered more on the communicative aspects of decisions than on the appraisal of alternative choices for the decision (Bronn 2014), which makes it a strategic management function. This makes most organizations persistently focus on the technician role of PR and neglect its management role. However, Dolphin and Fan's (2000, 2) definition of PR as "the strategic management process by which an organization communicates with its various audiences to the mutual benefits of both and to its improved competitive advantage" positions PR as a strategic management function.

Fact is, the Institute of Public Relations (IPR), Ghana also stresses that PR must be a management function in organizations. The institute provides a definition of PR practice in the 2018 proposed bill to the parliament of Ghana, seeking authorization for the institute to be a professional accrediting body for the practice of PR in Ghana. The definition captures PR as a management function and advocates the institution of PR as a management function as follows: "a planned and sustained distinctive management art and social science function based on an understanding of human behaviour that identifies issues of critical relevance, analyses future trends and predicts their consequences" (IPR, Ghana 2018, 54).

Ferguson (2018) advances that the position of the practitioner in the organization is critical in the management of relations. This is because it informs the extent to which practitioners are given the chance to manage the publics of the organization and how much impact they make in the organization in order for their role to be recognized as important. The position of the practitioner, invariably, informs the functions they play and the consequent impact they make in organizations. This study therefore sought to ascertain if PR practitioners play management roles in selected organizations in Accra, Ghana. The specific research objectives guiding the study were:

1. To find out if PR practitioners perform strategic management functions and whether those roles have any impact on organizational objectives, goals, policies and outcomes;
2. To explore the challenges militating against the effective practice of PR as a management function in these organizations; and
3. To find out the perceptions and expectations of top managers about the role PR plays in the strategic management, as well as the overall success, of these organizations.

The study used a qualitative method. The respondents of the study were from four selected organizations in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. Data for this research was collected using semi-structured interviews. Data was subsequently thematically analyzed.

Below I present a brief review of related studies on the subject matter, after which the theoretical framework for the study is discussed. Next, the methods of data collection are discussed, followed by a discussion of findings.

Literature Review

“Public relations is primarily a strategic organizational function that nurtures positive relationships with publics and stakeholders for organizations of all kinds: private, public, non-profit, activist, and advocacy” (Valentini and Edwards 2019, 195). PR plays a strategic communications function through the intentional-purposeful, persuasive, public use of communication to accomplish organizations’ missions (Wiencierz and Röttger 2019). Although most definitions of PR stress the strategic managerial role of the PR function, PR scholars are frequently challenged to justify why PR is important to organizations and why attention should be given to that function (Ferguson 2018). This is largely because the PR role is seen as a mere communication function and, because communication comes naturally to us as humans, it is assumed that anybody can play that role. For most practitioners, the expectation management or organizations have of them is for them to function as communication facilitators. They are not given the opportunity to bring on board all their other competencies, which would bring out their strategic management abilities as well. When management does not have a fair appreciation of the full complement of the PR function, practitioners will not likely perform other important roles that will make them relevant to organizations.

Anggreni’s (2018) study on PR as a management function in higher education found that PR practitioners acted as communication facilitators and technicians rather than managers. Further, it revealed that PR practitioners were not involved in the strategic decision-making of the University where the study was conducted. Some of the respondents also did not have a good understanding of the role of PR and placed PR in the same position as marketing. The non-appreciation of the function by the practitioner is something that will work against the practitioner. In this case, it is obvious some of the practitioners themselves did not know their roles in the organizations in which they found themselves. It is not surprising, therefore, that they did not function as strategic communication managers.

Mykkanen (2017) found that communications practitioners in Finland played strategic partner, strategic liaison, facilitator, expert implementer, and disseminator roles. The results further showed that only the strategic partner and strategic liaison roles could influence board decisions. The facilitator and expert roles contributed to the quality of decisions, but final decisions were in the hands of others. Clearly, those who played strategic roles were core to strategic decisions and had a certain level of influence at board level. It is obvious that practitioners in this context will make better impact in their organizations. The functions and roles they play in their organizations will also be appreciated because of where they have been positioned in these organizations. It will also make them more visible in their organizations.

Within the Ghanaian context, Wu and Baah-Boakye (2007) conducted a survey among 64 PR practitioners in Ghana and found that most PR practitioners in Ghana were performing management roles in their organizations. The study further revealed that the most important skill for Ghanaian PR practitioners was interpersonal communication. Again, they found that PR and Marketing overlapped in terms of their functions. More than a decade after this study, it is imperative that another study is launched to look into the current state of affairs, albeit in different organizations. This present study additionally explores the challenges PR practitioners face in carrying out management functions and the perceptions and expectations of top managers about PR practitioners in their organizations.

Amidst the calls for PR to be a management function (Skinner, Von Essen and Mersham 2001; Cutlip, Center and Broom 2006), one of the arguments that has been prominent is that, in managing an organization’s PR system, practitioners must be the interpreters of the organization’s philosophy, policies and programs, which originate from top management (Seitel 2004). Hence those to whom PR professionals report must be those who run the organization. It is argued that the strongest PR department is one led by a communications executive who reports directly to the Chief Executive Officer (Rawjee et al. 2012). However, instead of practitioners functioning as instrument for policy changes and rationalization, together with other members of management (based on their strategic function), the PR role is usually relegated to other functions. This study investigates what prevails in selected organizations and additionally looks into the challenges practitioners face while playing their legitimate roles as well as perceptions and expectations top managers have about practitioners in their organizations, which has scarcely been explored in Ghanaian studies.

Theoretical Framework

A theory is “a way to understand events and to predict future events based upon research findings supporting the theory” (Ferguson 2018, 165). By this definition, a theory principally provides direction about how things should be done, including the practice of PR. Theory, thus, becomes central to the practice of PR. Importantly, Macnamara and Likely (2017) suggest theories influence how PR programs are evaluated, while Valentini and Edwards (2019) maintain that developing theories for the practice of PR is crucial for advancing the status of the field as a specialized or expert communication discipline. Macnamara and Likely (2017), however, contend that, due to how the practice of PR emerged, there was a lot of concentration on mass-communications models. These models included strong media effects theories and conceptualizations of communication as conforming to the ‘sender, message, channel, receiver’ models that Shannon and Weaver developed in 1949 and Schramm’s 1954 model, as well as information-processing theories based on early systems theory by practitioners.

Ferguson (2018) submits that theories like roles theory, those that pay attention to notions of direction of communication (that is, one-way and two-way models), as well as the asymmetrical and symmetrical models, can be useful for understanding public relationships. Macnamara and Likely (2017) maintain that the practice of PR needs to be guided by theory and suggest that theories like the unified model, the program logic model and the program theory model are viable theories to guide PR program evaluation. Because there is seeming less clarity about the PR function and its position on the organizational ladder (which this study seeks to explore), it will be important to consider a theory that speaks to how PR should function and be positioned in organizations – namely, Excellence Theory.

Excellence Theory

Excellence Theory is one of the theories proposed during the first two decades in which the field of PR emerged and focuses on the “organizational roles of public relations – whether as an internal function that helps organizations to function more effectively, or a function that assists organizations to fulfil their social obligations” (Valentini and Edwards 2019, 195). The theory provides an explanation for the value of PR to an organization and postulates a set of theoretical principles describing how the communication function should be organized, structured and practiced in an organization (Grunig and Grunig 2003, 35). The theory posits that for an organization to be effective it must act to solve problems and see to the goals of stakeholders as well as those of management. If this is not the case, stakeholders will either mount pressure on the organization to change or oppose the organization in a manner that will add cost and risk to organizational policies and decisions.

The theory proposes that the principles which make a PR department excellent are that the department should serve both managerial and technical roles. This moves away from the notion that PR provides communication technician support to other managerial functions. So, essentially, the managerial role of excellent PR departments goes beyond the administration of PR programs but positions excellent PR units as important and fundamental to the strategic management of organizations (Grunig and Grunig, 2003). In carrying out that strategic management role, PR practitioners identify and target key publics who can influence management decisions or be impacted by management decisions and develop strategic programs to build positive relations with them.

Two main tenets of the theory, which this study stands on, are: (1) practitioners should take part in strategic decision-making, aside from the technical roles and communication activities that they engage in; (2) PR departments must also not be subordinated to other departments. Essentially the theory says that excellent PR is rooted in strategic management. The studies informing the development of the theory showed that PR loses its unique role in strategic management if it is subsumed under marketing or other management functions.

In contradistinction to approaches to PR that view it as a technical support function for other management functions in organizations, excellence theory advocates that PR be a unique management function that enables organizations to manage their socio-political constituents. Essentially, an excellent PR function works with other management functions to help build relationships with relevant stakeholders. Guided by environmental scanning, relationship-building, issues and crises management objectives as well as informal and scientific evaluation of communication programs, PR professionals take part in strategic decision-making processes and counsel other managers about the consequences of potential decisions on publics (Grunig 2011). This leads to good management decisions which also result in strong long-term relations with the various publics of organizations. In addition, for PR to play this unique role, the theory holds that this function should not be subsumed under other management functions.

The theory also intrinsically makes a case for the understanding of, and support for, communication management by non-PR-practicing senior management (Grunig and Grunig 2003). That is why this study also has the objective of seeking the views of top management about the role PR plays in organizations as well as the

expectations they have from practitioners. Interviews with top managers shed light on whether managers hold views on PR excellence that conform to the normative implications of the Excellence Theory.

Methods

Research Design

The qualitative approach was used. This was because the researchers wanted to delve deeper into the actual experiences of respondents regarding the subject matter. The researchers employed the purposive sampling method to select respondents. The criteria for inclusion for practitioners were that respondents had to be PR practitioners and work in formal public or private organizations. They had to also be the heads of the departments or units they worked for and their roles had to be PR-related. The criteria for selecting managers were that individuals had to be top managers in the organizations they worked for, must have PR departments in their organizations, must be non-PR practitioners, and must be part of strategic decision-making in the organizations. Overall, eleven (11) respondents took part in the study. Specifically, eight (8) of the respondents performed roles associated with PR and three (3) were non-PR-practicing top managers. Below is a table detailing our participants for the study:

Table 1: Details of Respondents

<i>S/N</i>	<i>Designation</i>	<i>Industry/Company</i>
1	Head of Brands and Marketing	Insurance Company
2	Sales Administrator	Insurance Company
3	Head of PR and Marketing	Manufacturing Company
4	Head of Operations and Marketing	Manufacturing Company
5	Head, PR and Marketing	Manufacturing Company
6	Head of Business Development	Construction Company
7	Head, Marketing and Sales	Construction Company
8	Ag. Head of Corporate Affairs	Public Institution
<i>NON-PR-PRACTISING TOP MANAGERS</i>		
9	Managing Director	Construction Company
10	CEO	Manufacturing Company
11	MD	Insurance Company

Source: Study data

Data Collection and Analysis

Interview sessions were held in the various organizations at a date and time decided by respondents. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded. The researchers also took notes of relevant observations made during the interview.

After data collection, recorded interview sessions were played back and transcribed. Data was then analyzed thematically. In keeping with Bryman's (2016) suggestion, the researchers teased out the themes emerging from the qualitative data by reading through the transcription and identifying basic keywords/codes and combining such codes to build more composite codes or categories that were related to the research. Emerging themes fell under role and functions performed by PR practitioners, role of practitioners in strategic decision-making, relationship between PR department and other departments, barriers to the institution of PR as a management function in organizations, suggested solutions and perceptions of top management about the contribution of PR to organizational strategy and expectations of top management about PR roles and functions within organizations.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent

The researchers ensured respondents understood the purpose of the research and were willing to participate in the study. Respondents were informed about their freedom to withdraw from interview sessions at any point in the study as well as the liberty to decline to respond to questions they did not want to answer or that they did not possess enough knowledge about. Respondents' permission was also sought before interviews were recorded.

Anonymity

Respondents were guaranteed strict compliance to the standards of anonymity and so discussions of results are done without making reference to actual names of respondents and the organizations they work with.

Results of the Study

The themes that emerged under each research objective are discussed in this section. Identities of respondents are disguised in compliance with ethical research principles.

Functions Performed by PR Practitioners and PR Departments in Organizations

The researchers found that functions performed by PR practitioners across their organizations included shaping the organization's image, building the organizational brand, spreading the organization's message, minimizing the effect of negative publicity, and contacting media persons (media relations). Technical functions mentioned were the writing of speeches and the writing and distribution of press releases, memos, and news articles. Respondents were of the opinion that PR departments are essential to achieving organizational goals and objectives. The following quotes from the interviews throw light on this:

PR analyzes, anticipates, and interprets public opinions and attitudes of the public towards the brand and drafts strategies for the organization. It ensures strengthening of internal structures in the organization by maintaining a clear communication network between the management and employees. (PR Practitioner, Construction Company)

Yes, public relations is very important because if you consider the various publics that an organization would deal with, any mismanagement or otherwise of those various publics will affect or have an impact on the organization. So, you can decide that public relations is not important till you wake up and see a story going round about your brand and tarnishing its image. (PR Practitioner, Insurance Company)

Role of PR in Organizational Decision Making

We found that PR was not instituted as an executive function in three organizations, except one – the public institution. The PR heads in the other three institutions belonged to middle-level management and, nonetheless, participated in all organizational decision-making with top management. Respondents explained that PR inputs during meetings were regarded and counted as important by executive management.

Management appreciates our operations; they value our contributions and show it through their eagerness to listen to us and act on our inputs. (PR Practitioner, Insurance Company).

For the most part, yes. For instance, on Tuesday, there was a meeting on finalizing our Action Plan for the year and [presenting] to the Board of Directors and I was called to make submissions. Especially now that we are activating our social media page. So, we have put together our social media team. We are trying to make sure that we are active and visible on social media. The fact that I was called means they give our work the recognition it deserves. They fall on us for advice and for counsel. In [such cases], I use my expertise in addressing whatever issue it is. Whether communication, image or reputation of the organization, we are the first point of call. (PR Practitioner, Public Institution)

Relationship Existing Between PR Department and Other Departments

It emerged that there was collaboration between PR departments and other departments. Respondents explained that the relationship between other departments and theirs was usually intertwined and very positive because it fostered a sense of oneness, integration and coordination in efforts to achieve organizational goals and objectives. In three organizations, the PR department operated in conjunction with other departments, especially marketing. Respondents explained that, even though they did not have a stand-alone department for PR operations, PR efforts were combined with other functions to ensure coordination and the integration of these functions. This, in turn, enabled organizations to achieve their objectives and goals. The case, however, was different in the public institution. It had a functional department dedicated solely to PR operations.

Challenges Militating Against the Effective Practice of PR as a Management Function in Organizations

As part of the objectives of the study, the researchers explored barriers that prevented the effective institution of PR as a stand-alone department and as a top-management function. The following themes emerged:

Size as a Barrier

It was discovered that the size of an organization was a major barrier to the effective institution of PR as a stand-alone department and as a top-management function. One of the practitioners cited telecommunications organizations as being able to have dedicated PR departments because of their large size:

I feel that, depending on the size of the organization, all the related work in dealing with people could be segmented. So, in the telcos, because of the size of the telecommunication businesses, even in public relations, they are segregated into External Affairs and Regulatory Affairs, so the segregation of the functions depends on the organization. I'm sure that probably in the next five to ten years, when we've grown in leaps and bounds, we may segregate the functions, but because now we are a middle-tier firm we've tried to bundle a lot of these works. First, to ensure they are coordinated, and also to ensure that people are not there without a lot to do. (PR Practitioner, Insurance Company)

Purpose and Mission of Organization as a Barrier

Another point that emerged as accounting for PR not being instituted as a top-management function is the purpose and mission of the organization. Respondents explained that the decision about which departmental heads make up top management largely resides in the vision and mission of the organization. We found that the aims and targets of each organization differ. Also, the mission of an organization informs which functions are core to the achievement of those objectives and whether they should be part of top management or not. The PR practitioner in the public institution alluded to this:

It will depend on the type of organization as well. For instance, with this organization, we do not have any marketing department because we are not marketing anything. All that we are selling is reputation and image, so it [would] be out of place to have a marketing department. However, when you go to a bank, they have services for marketing. (PR Practitioner, Public Institution)

The practitioner in one of the insurance companies shared this opinion:

I think it is about size and also the work to be done. So, I would say that public relations today is a major thing for businesses [...] [W]hether there [should] be a designation called a PR person would be one thing, but the functions of a PR person [are] super-important for every organization in the twenty-first century and more so for businesses like ours that [relate] to the mass market. (PR Practitioner, Insurance Company)

Capabilities of the PR Practitioner as a Barrier

The capabilities of a PR practitioner also accounted for the decision of executive management to include such a personality in organizational decision-making. The respondents explained that being a part of top management goes beyond academic theories and qualifications and depends instead on the effectiveness and efficiency of the practitioner. The following quote from a respondent confirms this view:

It would be a function of what an individual wants and how an individual puts him or herself out. So, if you are [a] PR person who is very limited, narrow-minded and focused on the course you are studying in school, then you may step out and know very little about all the other things that [keep] a business running. If you think broadly and see yourself as an enabler of business and try on your own to acquire all the relevant skills and knowledge to keep a business going, you would see that everywhere you stand you are needed, because you are the one who can communicate in a way that even the least educated person can understand. You know that in organizations decisions are made based on information and how this information is communicated. If a PR practitioner is able to prove that he has the information

and communicates it clearly, he'll be very important in decision-making. Nobody will come and pick you if you [work] in your corner with a PR degree and say: "Come, let's make decisions." (Respondent, Manufacturing Company)

Misconceptions about PR as a Barrier

It was discovered that PR was generally viewed as a simple function to be carried out. Respondents explained that, since PR was a communication function, it is generally perceived as one that can be handled by anyone. For this reason, practitioners are not considered core to organizational decision-making and are only given communicative roles to play. This view is reflected in the quote below:

I feel that PR looks very simplistic, so everybody feels they can do it and everybody who wakes up and says "good morning" can do PR. So, there are times that people feel they don't have to learn it and don't have to take [their] time to study. And when I say "learn," people feel that everybody can talk, everybody can sit on radio, and everybody can face the media. Because it's not very scientific, people feel everybody can do it and they do not realize the damage they cause by these behaviors and actions. (Respondent, Insurance Company)

Suggested Solutions to Barriers

Respondents suggested solutions they supposed could help place PR where it belongs. Some of the suggestions included distinguishing PR from mere communication by being professional about the practice, building stronger networks, constant training to upgrade one's PR skills, mentorship by successful practitioners, and organizations realizing the important role of PR.

One way would be training, and another way would be through collaboration. Collaboration is very key. I think that experienced PR practitioners must be willing to, and should decide to, mentor the new generation of PR practitioners, not for them to behave like them, because their challenges are obviously different, but [so] that they would have a base to build their own and solve their own problems, having learnt from those experiences of these experienced practitioners. (PR Practitioner, Construction Company)

For a PR person to be able to work well, then definitely your networking abilities have to be really strong, because you are the interface between the organization and the public. Your media relations, particularly with the print and electronic media, and your art of communication; the way you carry yourself, the way you understand issues and the way you are able to comprehensibly explain issues will go a long way to help push yourself and the organization that you represent up. (PR Practitioner, Manufacturing Company)

Perception of Top Management about the Role PR Plays in Strategic Management and Organizational Success

These are findings related to interviews with two top managers who were asked to share their views on the role PR plays in strategic management and decisions as well as the overall success of organizations. Results showed the two top managers held PR in high esteem. They described PR operations as strategic to the achievement of organizational goals and objectives. This is reflected in the quote below:

Yes. It is strategic. Every organization is supposed to have a Strategic Plan. It is your strategic plan that actually defines the vision and mission of the organization and what you intend to achieve and the strategies that you intend to use to achieve your set goals and objectives. One key strategy you use, depending on the nature of the organization, is the extent to which you strengthen PR and let PR lead the effort to realize your set goals and objectives. (Top Manager, Construction Company)

Expectations of Top-level Managers from PR Practitioners

The researchers found that top managers expected additional duties and roles to be played by PR practitioners. The roles mentioned included marketing, customer service, publicity, events management, and publication design. A top manager had this to say: "In my opinion, PR practitioners should also be engaging in publicity, event

management and design publication activities” (Top Manager, Manufacturing Company). Another top manager took a similar view:

I think that every PR person today must understand customer service. Every PR person must understand marketing in all its forms and [shapes], particularly digital marketing, because PR tries to save the business, but you must understand what must be done to save the business. So, for me critically, the PR person of today must understand digital marketing. He must understand above-the-line [and] below-the-line marketing. He must understand daily customer service. These functions are key, so a good PR person could fit into any of these portfolios. That’s my belief. (Top Manager, Insurance Company).

Some of the roles mentioned by these top managers, such as publicity and events management, are essentially PR roles. The mention of these as additional roles could mean practitioners in the organizations do not perform those functions and perhaps use PR agencies to play that role. The suggestion of publication design has merit as it will enhance the personal capabilities and skills of the practitioner.

PR as a Collaborative Function

The study revealed that some top managers believe PR is more effective when it is merged with other communication functions like marketing. Their view was based on the idea that an integrated communication approach fostered harmony and more coordinated efforts towards the achievement of organizational goals. This is captured in the quotes below:

I think they should be integrated because as technology [...] makes the work [far] smaller no marketing person in the future [will] be able to be recognized as exceptional if he can’t understand the ethics of PR. And no PR person will be recognized as exceptional if he cannot understand the ethics of marketing too. Because both of them are communication anyways, but they target different ends of the communication. I would say that PR is super-effective if it is integrated with the customer service and marketing functions. (Top Manager, Construction Company)

Certainly, your capacity as a company determines how you go about things. If we go straight into advertising our products like that and the weight of clients’ demands [comes down] on us and we cannot satisfy them, we will be in trouble. They will write us off as not being serious, but if we [were] able to groom and grow up, we would be able to strengthen ourselves. We are still growing but we will get there. So, for now, this integrated approach enables us to attain our organizational objective. (Top Manager, Insurance Company)

Discussion of Results

PR as a Top-Level Management Function

According to Grunig (2006), one of the characteristics of an excellent PR function is it being a part of the executive management of organizations. Findings show that PR is not instituted as a top-management function in the insurance, manufacturing and construction companies studied. PR existed as a middle-level management function in all these organizations. The Corporate Affairs unit of the public institution was the only organization that belonged to top-level management. This speaks to the fact that roles played by practitioners influence where they are placed on the organizational ladder. Practitioners need to carry out roles that will oblige them to be made part of management.

Although the PR departments of the insurance, manufacturing and construction companies did not exist as executive functions in the organizations, the departments were still accorded optimum regard and considered key to the achievement of organizational objectives. This is positive and gives confidence for the future participation of practitioners in board decisions. Holtzhausen (2005) acknowledged that PR has evolved into a management function, thus giving PR heads access to the boardroom to contribute towards organizational success. It is believed that a stage in the evolution process, in this context, is recognizing the contribution of PR to organizational goals, which top managers in the organizations studied acknowledge. If practitioners strategically use research to identify

key publics, and through communication, build mutually beneficial relationship with these publics, and find strategic ways to show results for what they do and how they contribute to the organizational mission, they are likely to be positioned at the management level.

The PR field is concerned with more than just communication and so should not be limited to public communication, which would limit the practice to the communication processes and distract from the need to understand organizations' publics and to also understand the larger social environment in which publics and organizations exist (Ferguson 2018). This speaks to the usually disregarded function of PR as a strategic management function and provides a strong reason for practitioners to be positioned in such a manner that they are regarded as managers of relationships, albeit mainly through communication. Practitioners, thus, need to work closely with management so that strategic decisions are taken in the management of such relationships.

PR at the Departmental Level

One of the suggestions by Grunig (2006) for excellent PR practice is for organizations to have dedicated departments designated to the functions and roles of PR. Excellence Theory explains that PR loses its unique role as a strategic management function if it is subsumed under marketing or other management functions. Subsumption under a function like marketing results in attention being directed only to the stakeholder category that is of interest to that main function, such as consumers, rather than all stakeholders or publics of the organization.

This study revealed that the PR department was merged with marketing and branding in most of the companies studied. PR, however, existed as an autonomous functional department in the public institution, as advocated by the Excellence Theory. Wu and Baah-Boakye (2007) found that PR and marketing overlap in terms of their functions in some organizations in Ghana. This could be the explanation for why PR existed in conjunction with the marketing function in the insurance, manufacturing and construction companies considered in this study.

However, the merging of the two departments is likely to affect how PR practitioners in such departments handle certain issues that surface. Practitioners may not be able to offer typical PR solutions to such issues because they do not have vested prerogative or authority to make such decisions. Typically, in situations where PR and other functions are merged in organizations, the stakeholders or publics that are targeted are unlikely to be the ones practitioners would seek to pay attention to or collaborate with. It is likely going to be selective and tilted towards the interest of the organization rather than a mutually beneficial relationship of the type that PR as a strategic function emphasizes. However, the researchers can conclude that PR practitioners in merged departments are likely going to acquire and exhibit a wider and more open-minded approach to strategy development, which can be tapped into by organizations.

PR Practitioners' Participation in Strategic Decision-Making

Excellence Theory posits that PR practitioners must participate in strategic decision-making and implementation in the organizations to which they belong. PR practitioners' strategic management role helps organizations to identify the most important components of the environment and build good relationships with them through communication (Shamsan and Otieno 2015) for organizations to be competitive and effective. PR being part of management decisions means that practitioners can easily pass their views and opinions on to management and make significant contributions to affect the roles practitioners play and how they are perceived in the organization as well as to get management to listen to their concerns. Management is able to factor in their suggestions on policies and organizational goals, taking into consideration the publics of the organization since the PR practitioner is the core representative of both internal and external publics.

The theory also suggests that the most senior practitioner in the department must principally perform managerial roles and not technician roles in order to participate in decision-making. Findings indicate that the heads of the PR departments of the insurance, manufacturing and construction companies took part in organizational decision-making processes, despite them not belonging to top management. Plowman (2005) maintains that PR practitioners should use their knowledge and experience, in addition to the ability to plan strategically, and have a sense of good judgment, to solve organizational problems. If practitioners are seen as possessing strategic management abilities, their views will be incorporated into organizational decision-making. When such opportunities arise for practitioners, PR successes and challenges can be laid before management, thereby making organizations recognize the role PR practitioners play and accord them the needed attention and assistance. This will also make management assess the effectiveness of developed and implemented strategies and tactics.

The PR role is a strategic one. Its strategy is “conceptualized as a functional strategy, providing the vital link between the enterprise/corporate/business strategies and the public relations strategy” (Shamsan and Otieno 2015, 504). This function, as hypothesized by Shamsan and Otieno, can only be realized when there is recognition of the function and when it is also positioned suitably. The researchers are convinced that various models that have been suggested by scholars to help guide PR practice, especially regarding the evaluation of programs (such as the IPR Toolkit, the Unified Model, PII, the Program Logic Model and the Program Theory Model), suggest that management involvement in designing PR programs is imperative for effective campaigns and so demands that the function gets a top-management seat. The finding that practitioners are called upon to make inputs in management decisions shows that organizations recognize the strategic role PR plays. This can be the springboard that is likely to propel PR to be given a permanent seat at top-level management in organizations that are yet to institute this role as a top-level management function.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has established that PR practice in selected organizations has great potential for attaining excellence because practitioners exhibit most of the traits suggested by Excellence Theory. PR practitioners in these four organizations play strategic managerial roles and take part in strategic decision-making, although not all of them belong to top management. Top managers also exhibited understanding of the PR function.

This research concludes that PR makes a valuable contribution to organizational strategy. Understanding of PR has moved beyond being regarded as tool to facilitate communication between the organization and its stakeholders, such that it is also viewed as an intrinsic part of organizational strategic decision-making. PR practitioners in all selected organizations play managerial roles, although PR has not been institutionalized as management function in all these organizations. On a good note, top management recognize PR as a strategic function. This recognition gives a positive signal that PR is likely to be institutionalized as a top-management function in the course of time, should practitioners determinedly prove their worth.

Implications for Practice

PR practice in selected organizations generally has a favorable image. Top management perceives the PR role as vital to organizational performance. For that reason, practitioners could leverage that to influence executive management to institutionalize their role as a top-management function. Such opportunity should not just be in name; rather, practitioners should equally be given an impartial chance to express their views and opinions during strategic decision-making processes. PR practitioners should be given the opportunity to suggest PR solutions to issues that have a bearing on reputation, crises and branding, among other things, while marketing practitioners focus on core marketing activities such as sales promotion. This will make each role complement the other to enhance the productivity of the department.

Constant evaluation of PR activities is also necessary for the success of any PR department and organization as a whole. It also provides evidence for the value PR brings to organizations. Practitioners should implement different monitoring and evaluation tactics to measure PR strategies.

Limitation of Study

The findings of the study are not transferable to other contexts because of the sample size used. They can, therefore, be generalizable only to the organizations studied. However, this research has practical implications as it serves as empirical evidence for the status of PR practice in selected organizations. It provides evidence for how PR is perceived by both practitioners and top management. The study is also a viable source of information for guiding the practice of PR as espoused by scholars and practitioners who want the field positioned where it belongs.

Future Research

Future research could delve deeper into the perceptions of top management about the practice and institution of PR as a top management function by expanding the sample size to get a bigger picture. This will help in the formation of a broader perspective on how top management perceives the PR function and can inform how practitioners play their roles in organizations.

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