

AN ASSESSMENT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICES IN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES IN BENUE STATE

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Abstract

The paper investigated the practice of public relations in university libraries in Benue State, Nigeria. The purpose of the study was to assess the extent to which university libraries in Benue State create good relationship with users. The study adopted descriptive research design. The study was conducted in two government owned university libraries in Makurdi, Benue State. The population and sample of the study was 51 in two government owned university libraries in Makurdi, Benue State. Data was gathered through questionnaire and presented in tables and analyzed with the use of descriptive statistics such as frequencies and mean. Findings indicate that the university libraries understudy used orientation/instruction to create good relationship with users to a high extent. The university libraries also produces publicity campaign for users through institution signage (layout) and persuade funders/stakeholders to provide library resources for the user community through lobbying decision makers of the library to accept and implement library budgets proposals. It recommends that the libraries under study should also think of creating good relationship with users through their websites as it is a modernized way of relating with users. The study concludes that public relations are important to be practiced in other libraries so as to project their good image.

Keywords: University Libraries, Public Relations, Library Public Relations, public Relations Practices.

Introduction

One of the strongest pillars that support the university's academic programmes is the university library. This is because they provide adequate support to all the academic programmes of the universities through selection, acquisition, processing, management and dissemination of quality information resources and services. University libraries therefore are academic libraries found in universities. One of the statutory functions of the university libraries as identified by Saka, Abbas and Salman (2017) is to acquire information resources for undergraduate, postgraduate and faculty members and researchers. These information resources according to them include but not limited to textbooks, serials, ICT, reference sources and works. In order to serve the academic community better, university libraries need to device various means of reaching out to the public, build bridges or trust, understanding, cooperation among others. The means of doing this in university libraries is referred to as library public relations.

Generally, public relations has been described by Harlow cited in Nnadozie, Nnadozie and Okeke (2015) as a distinctive management function which helps to establish and maintain

mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its public. Library public relations therefore is defined by Shidi and Sambe (2018) activities that are geared towards creating positive image and reputation of library institutions (different types of libraries) before the public or its stakeholders. In view of the above plethora of views, libraries in general and university libraries in particular need public relations programme bearing in mind that all library activities directly or indirectly done to promote the library image and use of library is an act of public relations and therefore requires public relations activities to make it efficient.

Harrison (2011) identified the ultimate objective of library public relations as to ensure that the maximum number of people know of the existence of our libraries, where they are located, what they contain, what they do, and how they can help users to acquire more information and generally become more literate and better-educated members of the community. Library public relations according to Nnadozie (2015) creates wider awareness on the operations and services of the library, the exposition of information resources in stock as well as other unconventional services which are aimed at ensuring that library patrons are satisfied. This means it influences and creates confidence for library services in different ways by creating or making people understand or be in the know of library policies, operations and services. Some of these according to Nnadozie, Nnadozie and Okeke (2015) include book fair and exhibition, readerships promotion and campaign, library displays, library instruction/orientation programmes, reference/referral services, publication of accessions list and current contents, inter-library cooperation, library tours, library extension services, photo exhibition, press releases/conferences and media interviews, hosting of special events, among others. These activities according to Shidi and Sambe (2019) are meant for awareness creation, correction of negative image of the library, improves the use or patronage of library resources and services, fosters unity and cooperation among staff, enables libraries and its staff know the needs of the community etc.

In spite of the usefulness of public relations in libraries, university libraries in Benue State particularly the government owned in Makurdi may not be assessing their public relations activities in order to know how effective they are building relationships with the public and how the public are aware of what they have, what they do, how they do it as well as benefits. It is in view of this that assessment of the public relations activities in selected university libraries in Benue State, Nigeria becomes a source of worry to the researcher.

Research Objectives

The following objectives were formulated to guide the study

1. To determine the extent to which the University of Agriculture Library, Makurdi and the Benue State University Library, Makurdi create good relationship with their users;
2. To know how the two university libraries under survey produce publicity campaigns for users
3. To know how the two university libraries under survey lobby funders/stakeholders to raise more funds for the provision of resources and services

Research Questions

The research was guided by the following research questions

1. To what extent are the University libraries under study creating good relationship between with their users?
2. How do the two university libraries produce publicity campaigns for users?
3. How do the two university libraries lobby funders/stakeholders to raise more funds for the provision of resources and services?

Literature Review

This subheading reviewed related literature on university libraries and library public relations. University libraries are academic libraries established and attached to universities. According to Ashaver and Bem-Bura (2013) university libraries are the repositories of knowledge that provide the vital under pinning for national development. Sambe and Oche (2017) articulate that university libraries exist to provide and disseminate information to users or the academic community. This means the aim of university libraries is to provide information resources and services that will support the teaching, learning, research and community development. University libraries provide information resources and services that are meant to be made know to the public. It is when the awareness of the available information resources and services is created that the use of resources and services is optimally promoted by the user community. Public relations are therefore a major practice for promoting the availability and use of information resources and services of the university libraries.

Public relations are not different from the promotion of a favourable public image for the library and its services. Public relations are defined by Nnadozie, Nnadozie and Okeke (2015) as the series of carefully-planned efforts at creating positive reputation. Nwosu and Njoku (2015) described library public relations as a service-oriented and client –centered activity in which public interest not personal reward should be the primary consideration. This means library public relations is a public service and not a private or personal service and should deal with reality and not false fronts. Edom, Nwosu and Akanwa (2015) look at it as deliberately planned, systematic and research-based activities of any library which are aimed at building and sustaining mutual relationship with members of the community in which the library is located. Library public relations according to Edom, Edom and Egbuchu (2015) are an important means through which the publics of the library (library staff, users/readers, financiers/sponsors, book vendors, etc) can be increased and retained. Shidi and Sambe (2019) identified public relation activities as library resources display, library tours, library cooperation, library instruction/orientation, reference/referral services, current awareness services, selective dissemination of information, circulation services, compilation of bibliographies, list of new materials, posters, seminars, and conferences, book launch, book fair, library website creation, news talk, poress briefing programme, placement of advert, phone in programme etc. These activities according to Mbashir, Job and Edom (2015) influences and create confidence for library services in the public in various ways such as making public aware of the services and policies of the library. This means that while the organization is growing in its entire ramification, the staff members are enjoying good working relationship and is equally growing.

A reasonable number of authors investigated into the subject matter of this research (public relations). For instance, Hazen (2010) explores and analyses the changing media landscape, its effects on press, journalism and the news agenda, and subsequently, how those effects are changing the practice of media relations and the roles and relationships of public relations. The study findings reported that it is evident that the media landscape is changing the roles and relationships of current PR practice, and through the inherently social and communal developments online, these changes, when met with an appropriate knowledge of the media ecosystem, forecast an opportunistic time for the progression of public relations. Odine (2011) investigate marketing library services in academic libraries in Niger State, Nigeria. The results revealed that the need for marketing library services is to achieve the objectives of the library and enlighten the users on the relevance of library use.

In another study, Igbokwe (2009) investigated strategies to enhance effective marketing of library services. The findings the study reveal that library orientation, increased awareness of users, in house display, exhibitions, and internet services were mainly used as marketing

strategy. Petrovic (2014) studied impact and efficiency of e-public relations with particular reference to online campaigns in “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău. The study believes that public relations may prove their efficiency to the extent in which they succeed in optimizing their communication with the public, facilitating two-way communication. The study also shows that dialogic communication created by the strategic use of online public relations is one way for practitioners to build relationships with the public.

Marshall (2001) studied public relations in academic libraries with the aim of descriptively analyzing the results of interviews with 13 library directors on public relations in academic libraries. Findings indicated that public relations efforts for their libraries focused on the campus community. It also reveal public relations activities that bring campus and, in some cases, community members to the libraries to include receptions held to celebrate major events such as completed renovation projects and National Library Week. Vasileiou and Rowley (2011) investigated marketing and promotion of ebooks and use. From the findings of the research it was discovered that none of the libraries had a marketing communication strategy relating to e-books. Yet on the other hand most interviewees were able to point to a range of tools used to promote e-books and some had plans for improvements in their promotion activities. Bhargava (2010) investigated the use of internet in public relations and its impact on the practice. The findings revealed that there are considerable variations in the use and application of the different online tools in the New Zealand public relations practice. This discrepancy as revealed by the study findings was found to have been influenced by the area of work and experience of the practitioners along with their knowledge of the Internet and the organisational environment they operated in.

In a related study, Burns (2015) investigated practitioner perceptions of school library advocacy with the aim of exploring school librarians’ perceptions of advocacy within the context of their school library setting. Findings show that school librarians must continue to build relationships with stakeholders and create awareness for the school library position as they define the activities of advocacy unique to their library setting. Cottrill et al (2015) looked at impact of advocacy with the aim of outlining the bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s Global libraries (GLs) initiative approach to advocacy and how it informs, guides and integrates impact data support sustainability of GL program results. Findings demonstrate the importance of identifying community needs, designing impact measures to demonstrate how libraries help to address those needs and the variety of ways impact evidence can be used to effectively advocate for public change in perceptions of libraries by local decision makers.

Statement of the Problem

One of the efficient means of creating awareness of the university libraries vast amount of resources and services as well as building relationship with users is through public relations activities. This is because public relations activities enable the development of knowledge and understanding of a newly introduced initiative by the library. It is expected that the concern university libraries having being situated in the heart of the Benue State capital to serve their community with diverse needs will embark upon public relations programme or activities giving that a good number of users may not be aware of the available resources and services, operations or functions as well as the benefits to be derived from these libraries.

Lack of constant review and assessment of the practice of public relations activities in the concerned university libraries will affect the effectiveness of resources and services provision and this will present a negative impression to the general public which will in turn weaken the relationship between the library and the general public. In spite of this, no empirical study seems to have been conducted to assess the practice of public relations in the concerned libraries. This creates a lacuna in the literature of the subject that the present study is set to fill.

Research Method

The study adopted a descriptive survey design. The area of study was university libraries in Makurdi, Benue State, Nigeria. The population of the study was four University Libraries in Benue; namely Francis Sulemanu Idachaba Library, Federal university of Agriculture, Makurdi; the Benue State University Library, Makurdi; the University of Mkar Library, Mkar, Gboko and the National Open University Library, Makurdi. Out of the four university libraries, three are government owned while one is not. However, only two governments owned university libraries (Francis Sulemanu Idachaba Library, Federal university of Agriculture, Makurdi and the Benue State University Library, Makurdi) with a population of and sample size of fifty one (51) librarians are selected and used. This is categorized as 29 academic librarians in University of Agriculture Library Makurdi and 22 academic librarians in Benue State University Library, Makurdi. Data were collected through questionnaire and were presented in tables and analyzed with the use of descriptive statistics such as frequencies and mean. In decision making, the researchers considered the average mean of 3.25-4.00 as VHE/SA, 2.25-3.24 as HE/A, 1.75-2.49 as LE/D and 1.00-1.74 as VLE/SD. This means that only the mean of 2.50 and above was accepted and used while the mean of below 2.50 is rejected and not used.

Results

The results of this study are presented in tables and analyzed in line with the research questions that guided the study.

Table 1: Mean Responses on the Extent to which the Libraries Create Good Relationship with Users

S/N	ITEMS	VHE	HE	LE	VLE	$\bar{X}$	Decision
1	Through user orientation/instruction	40	26	5	4	3.36	VHE
2	Through distribution of press releases	38	20	15	2	3.25	VHE
3	Through interviews of top officials on television	31	24	18	2	3.12	HE
4	Through face to face interaction with library officials (reference interviews)	30	17	5	23	3.09	HE
5	Through phone in programmes on radio	27	31	12	5	3.06	HE
6	Through advert placement	21	24	19	11	2.73	HE
7	Through library website	29	39	2	5	2.22	LE

Key: VHE= Very High Extent, HE=High Extent, LE=Less Extent, NE=No Extent

Source: Field survey, 2019

Table 1 present respondent responses on the extent to which the libraries creates good relationship with users. Data in the table show that items 1-6 with mean responses of 3.36, 3.25, 3.12, 3.09, 3.06 and 2.73 presented are schemed to the affirmative. This means that university libraries in Benue State create good relationship with users to the high extent. However, item 7 in the table with a mean response of 2.22 is rejected, implying that good relationship with users is not practiced in those libraries through website.

Table 2: Mean Responses on How the Libraries Produce Publicity Campaign for Users

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	$\bar{X}$	Decision
8	Through institution signage (layout)	43	30	2	0	3.55	SA
9	Through notice board	40	29	2	5	3.41	SA
10	Through suggestion boxes	39	27	5	2	3.32	SA
11	Through library bulletins	25	35	15	0	3.13	A

12	Through bill board	30	18	25	2	3.01	A
13	Through public information desks	21	38	5	11	2.92	A
14	Through library publication	17	33	20	3	2.80	A
15	Through radio and television	11	19	31	14	2.68	A
16	Through media talks	33	10	7	23	2.65	A

KEY: SA=Strongly Agree, A= Agree, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree

Field Survey: 2019

Table 2 shows responses of respondents on how the libraries produce publicity campaign for users. Result presented in the table show that items 8-16 with mean responses of 3.55, 3.41, 3.32, 3.13, 3.01, 2.92, 2.80, 2.68 and 2.65 respectively to the affirmative. This is a clear picture of respondents' agreement on how university libraries publicise their activities in Benue State.

Table 3: Mean Responses on How the University Libraries Lobby for Funding

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	$\bar{X}$	Decision
17	Lobbying decision makers of the library to accept library budgets proposals	40	26	5	4	3.63	SA
18	Organizing shows in respect to the needs of the library	31	24	18	2	3.55	SA
19	Publication and distribution of newsletters containing library needs to decision makers of the library	30	38	5	2	3.28	SA
20	Request for funds from friends of the library to procure library resources	30	25	15	5	3.06	A
21	Donation request for money such as bequests and memorials	25	31	10	9	2.96	A
22	By requesting for grants	23	33	10	7	2.90	A
23	Distribution of fliers containing library needs to Library Committee members	11	19	31	14	2.68	A
24	Public and private partnership	7	10	33	23	1.92	D

KEY: SA=Strongly Agree, A= Agree, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree

Field Survey: 2019

Table 3 demonstrates respondents view on how the libraries lobby funders/stakeholders to provide library resources. Result indicates that items 17-23 with mean responses of 3.63, 3.55, 3.28, 3.06, 2.96, 2.90 and 2.68 are schemed to the affirmative while item 24 which is not affirm is rejected as a way the libraries in question lobby funders/stakeholders to provide library resources and services.

Discussion of Results

Results of this study are discussed in relation to three research questions that guided the study. Regarding the extent to which the University libraries in Benue State creates good relationship with users, this study reveal that the libraries creates good relationship with users through user orientation/instruction, distribution of press realizes and interviews of top officials on television, face to face interaction with library officials (reference interviews), phone in programmes on radio and advert placement to a high extent. This is in consonance with Burns (2015) who insist that school librarians must continue to build relationships with stakeholders and create awareness for the school library position as they define the activities of advocacy unique to their library setting.

Regarding how the libraries publicise their activities, the study reveals that the university libraries in question produces publicity campaign for users through institution signage (layout), notice board, suggestion boxes, library bulletins and bill board. Others include public information desks, library publication, radio and television and media talks. This is in agreement with Nnadozie, Nnadozie and Okeke (2015) who identified different ways of campaigning for library resources and services, policies and operations to include book fair and exhibition, readerships promotion and campaign, library displays, library instruction/orientation programmes, reference/referral services, publication of accessions list and current contents, inter-library cooperation, library tours, library extension services, photo exhibition, press releases/conferences and media interviews, hosting of special events, among others.

On how the libraries lobby funders/stakeholders to provide library resources, the study reported that the university libraries lobbying decision makers of the library to accept library budgets proposals, organizing shows in respect to the needs of the library, publish and distribute newsletters containing library needs to decision makers of the libraries as well as request for funds from friends of the library to procure library resources. Other ways include donation request for money such as bequests and memorials, requesting for grants as well as distribution of fliers containing library needs to library board members. This is in consonance with Cottrill et'al (2015) who demonstrated the importance of identifying community needs, designing impact measures to demonstrate how libraries help to address those needs and the variety of ways impact evidence can be used to effectively advocate for public change in perceptions of libraries by local decision makers.

Summary and Conclusion

In summary, public relations activities are veritable instruments for building relationship with users as well as creating awareness of the existing resources and services in university libraries. The university libraries in Benue State, Nigeria use orientation/instruction to creates good relationship with users to a high extent. The University libraries publicise their activities for users through selective dissemination of information as well as lobby stakeholders to provide library resources for the user community by convincing the stakeholders of the library to accept budgets proposals. In conclusion, the study concludes that the practice of public relations in university libraries is necessary for improved services and user satisfaction.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the survey, the following recommendations are made

1. University libraries in Benue State should employ other ways of creating good relationship with users such as creating and making use of library websites
2. University libraries should also consider public and private partnership as a good way of persuading library stakeholders or funders to provide library resources for the user community.

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