# An Evaluation of Reputation Management in Selected Federal Universities in South West Nigeria

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**Abstract:** This study evaluates reputation management in selected federal universities in South West Nigeria. Questionnaire (for 423 respondents), interview and focus group discussion were used to generate the needed data. Findings show that most of the respondents were not oblivious of the concept of reputation management in a university environment. Their knowledge of these institutions' reputation also created a favorable impression although a category of stakeholders were unimpressed, owing to lack access to the required information or updates about these institutions. The study notes that universities stand a good chance of building a good reputation if they establish and sustain good relationships with one another.

**Keywords:** Public relations, relationships, management, universities, reputation, south west Nigeria**.**

## Introduction

Reputation management is an important aspect of every responsible organization. Not only does it help the organization to distinguish itself, it is also a strategy that helps shape the attitudes, beliefs, opinions and actions of its

internal and external publics. Wartick, (1992: p.33) asserts that a reputation is an aggregate evaluation about how well an organization is meeting stakeholder expectations based on its past behaviors.

The reputation of an organization can be developed through the information stakeholders have concerning the organization. Much of this information comes from within the organization or news reports as media coverage is an essential method solicited to manage reputation of an organization (Carroll & McCombs, 2003). Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and so forth also constitute a source of information. It is widely believed that stories from such secondary sources as social media can trigger organizational crises.

The stakeholders' desire is for the organization to meet their expectations. Where this is not possible, an expectation gap occurs and this is problematic for organization's reputation (Reichart, 2003, p.58). Reputations are based largely on how stakeholders evaluate an organization's ability to meet their expectations and this is especially so for a university. The fact The word "university" encompasses such words as *universe*, *universal, universally,* which is an indication that a higher institution should operate an all-inclusive policy towards its publics.

This study, against this background, evaluates reputation and how it is managed in some selected universities in South-West, Nigeria.

## Statement of the Problem

University reputation anchors on the relationships that exist between the institution, its staff, students and other stakeholders within the context of the institution's vision and core values. The university's inability to manage the publics' perception of the vision and values creates an expectation gap that could lead to crises. While focusing on some federal government-operated tertiary systems in Nigeria the questions are asked: Does Nigerian universities engage in reputation management? If yes, to what extent and what strategies do these universities adopt for an effective reputation management?

## Objectives of the Study

The study transposes the foregoing questions to the following objectives:

1. To assess the level of awareness of universities in South-West about reputation management.
2. To evaluate the influence of reputation management on the image of universities in South West.
3. To determine the extent to which Universities in South West are engage in Reputation Management

## Hypotheses

The following hypotheses are tested in the study:

- The level of awareness does not correlate with respondents' perception of university's reputation.
- The level of satisfaction with reputation management strategies adopted by a university does not affect on the rating of the university image.

## Theoretical framework and literature review

This study anchors on the relationship management theory which postulates that the success of an organization's programs depends largely on the quality of its relationship and not the quantity of the messages produced. Ledingham (2003) who has proposed relationship management as the core of a general theory of public relations argues that measuring the success or malfunction of long-term relationships is an important element in the assessment of public relations and corporate communications activity. As important as it can be for an organization to measure Public relations outputs and outcomes, it is even more important for an organization to measure relationships. This is because for most organizations measuring outputs and outcomes can only give information about the effectiveness of a particular or specific public

relations program or event that has been undertaken according to Hon & Grunig (1999). Ledingham (2005, pp. 740-743) proposes the following basic principles of relationship management:

- The core focus of public relations is relationships.
- Successful relationships involve benefit both for an organization and interacting publics.
- Organization-public relationships are dynamic; that is, they change overtime.
- Relationships are driven by the needs and wants of organizations and publics, and the relationship quality depends on perceptions of the degree to which expectations are fulfilled.
- Effective management of organization-public relationships leads to increased understanding and benefit both for organizations and publics.
- The success of organization-public relations is, measured in terms of relationship quality, rather than message production or dissemination.
- Communication is a strategic tool in managing relationships, but communication alone cannot sustain long-term relationships in the absence of organization behavior.
- Organization-public relationships are influenced by relational history, the nature of

the interaction, the frequency of exchange, and reciprocity.
- Organization- public relationships can be categorized by type (personal, professional, community), and whether they are symbolic (communication driven) or behavioral (program driven).
- Relationship building is application in all aspects of public relations study and practice.

This theory is anchored on public relations practices. Looking at the principles suggested in the theory, the core responsibility of the public relations officer is to build and maintain a good relationship between and among the various stakeholders of the university. Through the use of communication strategies, the public relations officer can manage its reputation.

## The role of Public Relations in Managing University Reputation

Universities engage in public relations to manage their relationship with their stakeholders. University relations task is an important aspect of the job of the public relations practitioner. Baskin, Aronoff & Lattimore (2003, p. 116) assert that one of the major components of public relations is a university news service whose job is to publicize the information that originates from the campus. They add that university relations officials

do this by responding to calls from reporters. They make use of news releases and feature stories about the occurrence of important events, for instance, the appointment of a new vice chancellor.

Special events management is another aspect of university relations. According to Heath (2005) an educational institution is overwhelmed with special events- which can include new building dedication, matriculation, and convocation.

The third area is the communication of the University's image through graphic arts and web design. Heath (2005, p.742) explains that such work usually includes the display of the university logo, project planning, and a great deal of photography video and audio.

The creation and production of University publications whether books or University and alumni magazines is also under university relations. Ledingham (2000) states that tasks that are not easily classified but falls under the purview of University relations officers include the following:
- providing an overview of press clippings for senior level administrators
- offering editorial project assistance to departments
- engaging in crisis management when matters do not go well, and

- Offering training for faculty and staff.

Against this backdrop, the importance of public relations cannot be overemphasized. The aspects of the university which public relations officers project in the management of the university reputation are image and identity, vision and culture (Collins & Porras, 1996, p. 234), personality, research output and products, institutional confidence and goodwill (Rotfeld, Abernathy & Parson, 1990; Dowling, 2002). It is also important that universities establish a sustainable relationship with other universities (local and international), as means of building good reputation. This, Fombrun (2000, p. 34) asserts, influences rival institutions' actions toward the university.

## Research Methodology

The research design encompasses a survey (using a questionnaire), interview and focus group discussion to elicit responses. Three institutions - Obafemi Awolowo University (Ile Ife), University of Ibadan and Federal University of Agriculture (Abeokuta) - were selected randomly from six universities. This study was interested in the analysis of reactions from the combined population of the three universities. Using Cochran's (1977) sampling formula, 423 respondents were sampled from a composite population figure of 51,230 comprising staff, students and members of the host communities.

Furthermore, the public relations officers from the sampled universities were the respondents for the interview session. Three focus group discussions were conducted in the three selected universities. Each focus group comprised eight discussants, giving a total of 24. Two members each from the public relations department, host community, the student union, and staff constituted the panel for the focus group discussion.

## Data analysis, findings and interpretation

In this session, the data from completed questionnaire were summarized and presented in frequencies and percentages for quantitative data. Out of 423 questionnaire copies, 408 respondents returned the questionnaire for data analysis. Thus, data analysis was based on the returned questionnaire.

## Research Question (RQ) 1: What is the level of awareness of Universities in South-West about Reputation Management?

Responses to RQ1 showed that majority of 403 respondents, representing 98.8% opined they were aware of the reputation management of their universities.

Five (5) of the 408, representing 1.2% did not share this view.

With regard to the source of awareness about university reputation management, 121 respondents, representing 29.3 percent opined that they became aware of their universities' reputation through reports in the media, 76 respondents, representing 18.4 percent knew about the reputation from what students said about the reputation. Also, 67 respondents representing 16.2% said they got to know about the reputation from what the corporate world said about research output and products while 144 respondents, representing 36.1 percent, got the information about reputation from the recognition and awards received by the institutions.

On the level of awareness of reputation management, 44 respondents representing 10.7 said there was a low level of awareness of reputation management. The majority of the respondents – 229 – or 55.4% responded that level of awareness was average. A total of 135 (33.9%) respondents said the level of awareness was high. The foregoing analysis enables us to construct a table of Pearson product moment correlation coefficient of the awareness and perception of university reputation management.

Table 1: Pearson product moment correlation coefficient of the relationship between the level of awareness and perception of university reputation

Hypothesis one: The level of awareness has no correlation with respondents' perception of university's reputation

| Variables | Awareness ( x) | Perception (y) | $X^2$ | $Y^2$ | XY |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Low level awareness | 44 | 323 | 1936 | 104329 | 14212 |
| Average | 229 | 85 | 52441 | 7225 | 19465 |
| High level | 135 | 0 | 18225 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | $\Sigma x=408$ | $\Sigma y=408$ | $\Sigma X^{2=}$ 72602 | $\Sigma Y^2 =$ 111554 | $\Sigma YX=33677$ |

df=406, x cal= -0.704, Table Value= 0.997

The data presented in Table 1 indicate that the calculated r-value of -0.704 is less than the critical r-value of 0.997 at 0.05 alpha level with 406 degree of freedom. Therefore, the null hypothesis that the level of awareness has no correlation with respondents' perception of university's reputation is accepted. With regard to whether

or not the perception of university's reputation emanated from the level of awareness: 323 respondents, representing 78.2% of the total respondents affirmed this while 85 (21.8%) negated the poser.

**RQ2: What is the level of influence of reputation management on the image of universities in South West?**

The influence of reputation management strategies adopted on universities' image is positive. To this end, 372(90.1%) of the respondents affirmed this while 36 (9.9%) negated the statement. The following table treats the null hypothesis that satisfaction with reputation management strategies adopted by a university does not impact on the rating of the university image.

Table 2: Pearson product moment correlation coefficient showing the relationship between level of satisfaction with strategies adopted and its impact on the university image

| Variables | Rating of satisfaction (x) | Strategies used in reputation (Y) | $X^2$ | $Y^2$ | XY |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Very satisfactory | 92 | 372 | 8464 | 138384 | 34224 |
| Satisfactory | 265 | 36 | 65536 | 1296 | 9216 |
| Not satisfactory | 60 | 0 | 3600 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | **Σx=408** | **Σy=408** | **ΣX²= 77600** | **ΣY² = 139680** | **ΣYX=43440** |

df =1, x cal= -0.0005, Table Value= 0.997

Data presented in Table 2 indicates that the calculated r-value of -0.0005 is less than the critical r-value of 0.997 at 0.05 alpha level with 406 degree of freedom. Therefore, the null hypothesis which states that the satisfaction with reputation management strategies adopted by a university does not impact on the rating of the university image is accepted.

On the rating of the universities image based on the reputation management strategies adopted, 256 respondents representing 62.0% rated the assertion as satisfactory. Also 92 respondents representing 22.3% were very satisfied, 60 respondents representing 15.7% perceived the assumption as unsatisfactory. On whether the universities have a true academic image, responses gathered from the

respondents show that majority of the respondents 376 felt that the institutions had good formal educational image nationally and internationally. On the other hand, 32 respondents representing 9.0% believed held sway.

When these figures were analyzed in degrees, majority of the respondents believed that the level of the academic image was moderate. This is evident by 170 respondents representing 41.2% of the total respondents who shared this view. A total 168 respondents representing 40.7% noted that the University's educational image was very high. The data also show that 27 respondents representing 7.7% asserted that the level of the educational image of the Universities was unimpressive while 43 respondents representing 10.4% were undecided. The last question item on whether the university image explains reputation comes up with the majority of 384 respondents, representing 93.0 percent opining that if faced with student from other universities in the world, the universities image explains their reputation. However, 24 respondents representing 7.0 percent of the total respondents did not share this view.

**Research question 3: What is the extent to which Universities in South West are engage in Reputation Management?**

Responses from the in-depth interview and focus group discussion provided answer to this research question.

*Analysis of qualitative data from in-depth interview on the Extent of engaging in Reputation Management*

The quest for maintaining a favorable reputation appeared to be the most dominant activity in the public relations activities of these universities. For some, maintaining standards as the first, best or world class was a major concern while in others, factors such as conducive learning environment, social facilities, the awareness of the university name, product (graduates) quality, admission criteria, library facilities, quality of academic staff, social responsibility amongst others, were the major areas public relations officers placed more emphasis. All the public relations officers noted that they ensured that all the activities of the institution incorporated the vision.

*Analysis of qualitative data from focus group discussion on the extent of engagement in reputation management*

Responding on the extent of engagement in reputation management, some of the participants admitted that the vision and mission statements of the universities were emphasized in programs and activities in order to

protect their reputation. They stated that efforts were made by the institutions to improve on staff/students' character and learning, sound knowledge, integrity and excellence as well as the projection of these efforts, which are critical to achieving good reputation.

**Discussion of findings**

Responses from Table 1 indicate that majority of 403 respondents representing 98.8% agreed that they were aware of the reputation of their universities. However, five respondents, representing 1.2% of the total respondents did not share this view. The data from Table 2 revealed that 121 respondents, representing 29.3 percent of the respondents opined that they became aware of their universities reputation through reports in the media; 67 (16.2%) said they got to know about it from what the corporate world said while 144 respondents, representing 36.1 percent, got the information from the recognitions and awards received by the institutions. This is an indication that the public relations officers were active as they made use of the channels of communication at their disposal to communicate to the universities' stakeholders.

Table 3 reavealed the level of awareness of reputation management in the universities. The majority of the respondents 229 representing 55.4% responded that there was average level of awareness. However, 135(33.9%) respondents said the level of awareness of was high. The question which sought to know whether the perception of reputation proceeded from respondents' level of awareness came with 323 respondents (representing 78.2% of total) who affirmed this while 85 (21.8%) negated the assertion.

The 44 respondents, representing 10.7 percent from table 3 said there was a low level of awareness about their universities' reputation management. Furthermore, the 76 respondents, representing 18.4 percent from table 2 who knew about the reputation from what students said about suggests that this category of stakeholder did not have direct access to information and where they got information it was from secondary source or sources which could have been rumor. In line with this, some authors (e.g. Carroll & McCombs, 2003: p .34) have observed that second-hand information from social media on the internet, such as weblogs and second-hand information from other people (e.g., word of mouth), could trigger crises. This is also in line with the hypothesis tested that the calculated r-value of -0.704 is less than the critical r-value of 0.997 at 0.05 alpha level with 406 degree of freedom - a reason why the null

hypothesis (that the level of awareness has no correlation with respondents' perception of university's reputation) was accepted.

The foregoing findings suggest that the level of awareness of the reputation and reputation management of the universities can determine the level at which stakeholders perceive their universities, which in turn occasion their impression. Stakeholders' interests must be considered when managing reputation as ignoring such could elicit problems about reputation. It is noteworthy that reputation is a collective representation of images and perceptions, not a self-promoted message. It involves relationships and partnerships with all stakeholders and may be lost with time if not sustained. Amon (2004) has observed that image is affected by attitudes and communication styles in an organization with regard to the relationships that exist between management, employees and its publics.

Where there are mixed feelings about the level of communication relationships, it implies that all the stakeholders are not carried along, the right channels of communication are not used and information flow is not properly managed. Thus, the public relations officers need to know that a university, by nature, has large and diverse publics who they should manage well in the interest of that institution. Therefore, university relations activities constitute a major function of the public relations practitioner for effective reputation management.

Analyses of the answers to RQ2, shown earlier, zeroed in on the level of influence of reputation management on the image of universities in South West Nigeria. The import of the analyses is that respondents believed that the reputation management strategies adopted by the universities had influence on its image. Accordingly, the public relations activities of universities should be to improve the overall standards to make them locally and globally acceptable.

This agrees with the widely-held assertion that a university is about a 'universe,' with commonness of practices, processes, methods, policies and strategies of providing learning and training at the highest level of formal education. Fornbrum's (2000, p. 34) conception of institution's relationship with other institutions also makes meaning in this regard. According to him "University's good relations influence rivals institutions and actions toward the university…"

RQ3 analyses show the extent to which universities in South West

Nigeria were engaged in reputation management. The public relations officers noted that their activities involved maintaining standards as the first, best or world class universities. Factors such as conducive learning environment, social facilities, the awareness of the university brand, quality of graduates, admission criteria, library facilities, quality of academic staff, social responsibility amongst others, were the areas of emphasis in maintaining a good image of the institutions. All the public relations officers noted that they ensured that all the activities incorporated the vision.

Quantitative data from the focus group discussion show that participants admitted that the vision and mission statement of the university were also emphasized in the universities' programs and activities in order to protect the reputation of the University. They also discussed that efforts were made to improve on character and learning, sound knowledge, integrity and excellence as well as project the efforts to their publics. They, however, stated that extra efforts were needed especially in the area of relating with the host communities and other external stakeholders.

The contributions of Bateman & Snell (2009) support the above analysis by noting that a university vision serves as guide line for the clarification of expectations. The vision and values of a university are expected to manifest in services provided by a university as well as its activities. Consistency of manifestation is basic to the maintenance and sustenance of a university culture and reputation.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

One finding of note in this study is that a segment of the university publics felt it was neglected. According to Deacon et al (1999, cited in Omojola & Yartey, 2016, p.16) such neglect "over-emphasizes certain sections of the population" and could be a source of conflict. Therefore, since the reputation management task has a communitarian aspect (Omojola, 2008, p. 176) it is important that all interests are taken into account when managing the reputation of a university, as ignoring such could lead to crisis. In addition to an all-inclusive policy of university authorities as a way of ensuring and maintaining a good reputation, the following are also recommended:

Universities should have a well-defined set of rules that guide their relationships with the various stakeholders. This helps reputation managers to clearly identify their terms of reference when engaging these publics.

A regular assessment of a university's reputation is necessary.

Some universities dwell in past glory. This is common with old universities which operate in the illusion of positive image. The assessment should be conducted against the rules that define a university's relationship with its publics. When these rules are juxtaposed with feedbacks from stakeholders, what becomes manifest is the status of the reputation and this development lets reputation managers know whether this reputation should be maintained or upgraded.

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