

Building Effective Public Relations in University Libraries in Nigeria

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Abstract

Library is one of the strongest pillars that hold the universities. Its role in the overall improvement and success in the intellectual development climate of universities cannot be overemphasized. However, as important as it is, it has a challenge of competing with other agencies and departments in the academic community for scarce resources. This is so, because, many in the university community perceive that internet and the mega-book stores are better place to find information that they need. Defending the university libraries existence becomes a serious challenge today thus the need to get the word out to draw people into their doors. To learn how they can better do this, a strategy such as public relations needs to be employed. This article therefore attempts to discuss building effective public relations in university libraries in Nigeria. It listed some techniques as regard making public relations effective in the libraries and concluded by advising libraries to be proactive in building positive relations as to structure and improve library service, so that they may make maximum contribution to their survival through learning

Keywords: Public Relations, University Libraries, Effective, University Community, Librarians.

1. Introduction

Universities play vital role in the educational and research development in Nigeria. For some time now there has been a tremendous increase in the number of university establishment in the both public and private universities in Nigeria. For instance in year 2011, nine new federal universities and five private universities were established and licensed. As at today the numbers of licensed public and private universities are about 124 in Nigeria. The reason for this upsurge in the university education is the attempt to meet the increasing number of young people clamouring for admittance to universities thus making the attention of university administrators to turn toward the improvement of the intellectual climate of the campus and toward relating the value of formal education to a dynamic world. One vital tool in the achievement of these values is university library. There is a slogan which says “no library no university”. However, university libraries are faced with challenges as never before as regard scrutiny of their resources, their facilities and their services, and the reappraisal of the role of library in the university system in Nigeria. Much has changed in recent years. University libraries in Nigeria have a lot to offer even more than before.

Understanding Public Relations in Librarianship Context

What exactly is Public Relations (PR) and how does it fit into librarianship? One definition of Public Relations is that “it is the business of trying to convince the public to have an understanding for and good will toward a person, firm, or institution”(Wolfe, 1997). Harlow (1976) stated that it is a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance, and cooperation between an organization and its public. Public relations is a positive activity that assists libraries in doing their jobs of opening the world of knowledge. It helps libraries to build support and promote their services and resources.

Deale (1958) described public relations as it applied to academic libraries as “the sum of the library’s external relations with students, with faculties, with administrative officers and with the community at large;

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and generally in that other of importance, depending upon the library's size and circumstances". Though one may not be professor of certain thing and practice something else but to a certain level, libraries or information scientist are involved in public relations. Thus librarians that understand the underlying policies of good service are central to success of public relations in the universities.

A glossary of marketing definitions from International Federation of Library Association (IFLA) defines public relations as "the form of communication management that seeks to make use of publicity and other non-paid forms of promotion and information to influence feelings, opinions or beliefs about the agency/library and its offspring. One basic fact or concept about the above definitions is that public relations are an act of drawing the attentions of the people to the services of university libraries. That is setting university community to grasp the value, the use and benefits derivable from library.

Public Relations and Academic Libraries Image

Goodwill is one of the priceless ingredients of an effective public relations program. The need for public relations in academic libraries must not go unrecognized because most organizations, be it public or private, a positive public image is vital to their overall success. Academic library administrators in Nigeria should be concerned about implementation of formal public relations program so as to understand the necessity of positive relation with their various users as insurance for continued financial and emotional support that will lead to their ongoing growth and success.

Gone were the days when libraries took for granted that everyone knew and understood the value of what we had to offer? Libraries are the sources for information. People needed them and hence they need to get involved with the good public relations program to bring libraries into the heart of university community. MacDougall (1958) pointed out that "sound public relations means the daily application of common sense, common courtesy and common decency in accordance with a continuous program of enlightened self-interest. A decent respect for the rights and needs of the university community must be coupled with this sensitive concern for good name of the institution which the librarians may for the moment represent.

2. Importance

Pastine (1990) stressed that Public Relations helps to put librarians' time and energy into the planning and advocacy role so as not to lose out in fiscal terms and in potential negative image. Aitufe (1993) stressed that public relations helps to capture the attention of students and staff so that the library may not be seen as mere book store. According to Harlow (1976) public relations is said to be helping libraries to bring public collections and services together while Russo (2001) noted that it is a positive activity that assists libraries in doing their jobs of opening the world of knowledge. It helps librarians to build support and promote their services and resources. Public relations are invariably closely linked with advocacy, marketing, communications, and development. They all work together to further the vital work of academic libraries. Not everyone loves libraries! Not everyone uses libraries or finds them worthy of funding. Sometimes successful public relation involves overcoming negative attitudes. Public relations in libraries concentrates more on selling the library as a whole, developing a corporate identity or image and disseminating a clear message to the community about library missions and goals.

Any institution is secure only as long as it commands the fullest measure of public understanding and support. Academic libraries must wake up to the need for increased understanding and support. University libraries in Nigeria should not be content trudging, forgetting that every service they offer (or do not offer) has overtone effect on public attitudes. Thus the role of the library, and the status of the librarians, on any given community, reflects to a large extent, the academic liveliness of the institution. In the present time where sports, stars, movies, beauty competitions, gymnasias and so on are making efforts to dominate the publicity scenario, the library should be seen as an important centre of the community. In the light of obvious neglect or indifference to library growth in the campuses, it would not be wise for any academic librarian to sit back and claim that public relations are of no concern to him. It is the public which makes possible the existence and the operation of my institutions as both MacDougall (1958) and Harwell (1958) have indicated

that libraries must realize that one of their primary responsibilities is cultivating the good will, understanding and support of the various publics they serve which library public relations program is out to achieve. Librarians are members of faculty boards hence are enabled to implement their public relations policies and to do a great deal to break down the barriers between students and library staff. To nurture students is to build goodwill; to build goodwill is one of the primary functions of effective public relations (Deale 1958).

In a nutshell, public relations perform the important function of communicating necessary information to various publics. This is achieved by informing faculty, staff, students and the entire campus community about new or existing library services, resource and materials.

3. Effectiveness of Public Relations in University Libraries

Academic libraries in Nigeria should see public relations efforts as a conscious activity. Public relations activities are ingredients in the success or failure of the university library. Some librarians may believe in having faculty complain to the university's administration about lack of materials in the library was the only effective way of bringing about change instead of public relations because complaints got attention and the results. Academic libraries in Nigeria must have format, written public relations plan in place so that the effectiveness of public relations should be reinforced to eliminate critical statements that are often made about academic librarians. Effective public relations have the capacity to bring so much to the university libraries in Nigeria. Public relations are an immediate research need that is often needed that brings students to the university libraries and forces them to learn about the resources and services that are available. Whatever extent faculties, staff and students actual use the library or are familiar with specific materials and services, publicity about the library and its resources can generate an overall positive impression.

The effectiveness of Public relations efforts can be felt in the following library activities.

- Library budget
- Outside funding and donation
- Student awareness
- Faculty awareness
- Increase use
- General campus attitude toward library
- Community awareness and use

Public relations are a good technique for fund raising and donation campaigns. Hunt and Lee (1992) maintained that the first step in fund raising is to develop a positive image. According to them libraries must take steps to communicate the library accomplishments to the public in order to prepare the way for a successful fund raising. Berger (1979) posited that employment patterns such as a public relations experts or staff and high involvement of directors and trustees, further increased funding level. An aggressive, well planned public relations efforts/drive could bring positive financial gain to the library, ensure robust budgets for the library, boost student, staff, faculty and the entire community awareness, increase patronage and reform the entire attitude of users towards library.

4. Techniques for Building Effective Public Relations in Nigerian University Libraries

Deale (1958) stressed that "nothing should take priority over the best interests of those for whom higher education is designed. It means users suggestions should be listened to sometimes and it also means that policies and program that are in the best interest must be initiated. While most users come to the library to study, learn and acquire information, many of them wish to acquire it painlessly whether or not library coddle or spoon-feed, or encourage independent study, the library's responsibility is to stimulate intellectual curiosity and inspire appreciation of the accumulated wisdom of the ages.

Public relations involve promoting the library as a whole, developing an identity and image, and communicating library goals and missions to the community. The university libraries should let the

community know what they offer. ‘Libraries build community’ so said by “Sarah Long” the past president of ALA, 2000 – 2001. This statement also applies to university community that is to say libraries Build University. Libraries according to Russo (2001) are places of opportunity and libraries bring one to the world.

Public relations seem not to be priority or recognition in university libraries in Nigeria. It is a neglected activity. Perhaps the librarians are ignorant of its potentials to the libraries. Librarians in Nigerian university libraries may wish to consider establishing strong and dynamic public relations unit for mutual benefits in the campuses. The long-term benefit for the libraries cannot be over emphasized. With the development in Information Communication Technology (ICT) numerous opportunities for the libraries are available to position itself as a leader on campus by integrating the new technologies into library traditional roles.

There are numerous techniques for building strong effective public relations in university libraries in Nigeria. These include:

- Making libraries available to users. Librarians whether in reference, serials or circulation, in technical or library or any other phase of library operation, have a responsibility to assist students when they seek help or obviously need it.
- Distribution of library handbook or guide to the library and its resources to users and general public.
- Exhibitions, book sales and other special events, displays of inexpensive books which students may buy. Fully equipped art galleries are necessary tool for showcasing library value and resources.
- Library should participate as much as possible in campus activities including students sponsored events and organizations. Such manifestation of interest helps dispel the stereotypes impression held by students who seldom see or talk with librarians.
- Manifestation of friendly interest in various departments of the college of university can stimulate or revive a colleague’s interest in services offered by the library. They can also get out and join their colleague for lunch occasionally, or meet in some other eatery or coffee joints. They can attend departmental, divisional and faculty meetings, in so far as time allows; they can also support lectures, concerts and other events in which other colleagues are interested and should be prepared, at all times to give extra help in a crisis situation.
- Libraries must be prepared to answer the questions and criticisms based upon misunderstanding on campus gossips. To do so is to mend fences as they are broken and contributes to professional esprit de corps.
- Library bulletins and current acquisition lists are two highly professional publications. It may vary from occasional mimeographed supplied publication printed weekly, monthly, quarterly, bi-monthly, for the digestion of the university community.
- Administration personnel should be included in distribution of library publications, such as library bulletins, or newsletter; the appropriate personnel should receive at least one written report a year from the libraries regarding the year’s accomplishment and future plans.
- University librarians should be aggressive propagandists so as to make the university community recognize the role of the library in the campus.
- There is need to always keep in touch with alumni and friends. The alumni and friends could be a rewarding forum for attracting financial support and donations for the library
- Marketing and development activities are necessary in the university libraries, writing news, photo and press releases announcements, designing library publications, creating web based public relations and exhibits, establishing multimedia program touch screen kiosks and CD-rooms; planning special events; and desktop publishing.

- Creating publicity for specific services and resource and to create and maintain awareness of library capabilities in the campus.
- Representing the library and participating in the university planning and organizations, to establish the library as a player in the campus development.
- Establishing regular communications channels promote an understanding of your organization internally and externally.
- Maintaining awareness of laws and regulations, that affect libraries and lobbying to ensure legislation that helps libraries provide effective services.
- Watching for a campaign and nation trends and issues that impact the library's image, and informing library and university administrators.
- Each university library should have a web page for the university plus a separate web for the library. The web page should contain among other basic information such as honours, and location to complex presentation of electronic newsletters, special collection, descriptions and friends of the library pages.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

Universities are made up of worlds within worlds. Everything in the contemporary society must be seen from the aspect of the producer, the consumer and the general public. For librarianship, authors and publishers represent producers; librarians are more of like distributors. The reading public the consumer, the outside world (or related publics) constitutes the general public in so far as it is indirectly affected by the integrated activities of the first three groups. Universities libraries in Nigeria cannot avoid having public relationships, but they can by building and maintain effective sound and productive relations control the results. University libraries are changing and dynamic places; they are places of opportunity; and they bring us the world.

Not everyone loves libraries. Not everyone uses libraries or find them worthy of funding. Sometimes successful public relations involve overcoming negative attitudes. Since our very future survival depends upon capacity to understand one another, and since knowledge is necessary in the process, education remains the cornerstone of progress. The university libraries in Nigeria must do everything possible to know the resources of their libraries, to eliminate misunderstanding, to create and build positive relations as to structure and improve library service, so that they may make their maximum contribution to survival through learning. Public relations must be accorded priority or recognition in the libraries. It must not be neglected activity thus the long term rewarding benefits for the libraries cannot be over emphasized.

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