

Public Relations Strategies in Indorama Eleme Petrochemical Limited, Rivers State: Critical Appraisal

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Abstract

The study appraises the public relations strategies in Indorama Eleme Petrochemical Limited in Rivers State. The researchers used mixed method; the interview and questionnaires. The stakeholder's theory guided the study. The study used descriptive statistics of percentage, mean, standard deviation, and mean weighted standard (MWS). The researchers were able to assess the strategies in Indorama Eleme Petrochemical, the company's prospects and challenges, which reveals that media relations, press releases, social media platforms and inside Eleme newspaper, community involvement, and crises management techniques are some of the public relations strategies by Indorama Eleme Plc. These strategies from time to time has help the Indorama Eleme Petrochemical limited in their operations and also affect positively the reputation of the organization. The study recommends that Indorama Eleme Petrochemical Limited should be more concern and focus more on its various social media platforms considering its wide traffic, locally and internationally. Also, the public relations officer/units should understand the company's goals, values, and target audience, so as to enhance internal communication-vertically and horizontally.

Keywords: Evaluation, Indorama Eleme, Public Relations strategies, Publics, Stakeholders

Introduction

Effective communication is significant for every organization's growth, as it serves as lubricant to bridge gaps, build brand awareness and enhance reputation management for an organization. To build and manage an organization's reputation, public relations become necessary. Its emergence has led to the adoption by organizations, to maintain good and effective management functions, create goodwill and enhance mutual understanding between the organization, public and its stakeholders. According to the British institute of public relations (BIPR) 1948, It is seen as a deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its publics. By this conceptual analysis, the BIPR underlines that every public relations activity must be a deliberate and cautious effort, which means it is not an impulsive or accidental activity rather it is embarked on as a planned effort devoid of a haphazard, indiscriminate and un-defined focus/direction.

Since public relations is a management function, there must exist a symbiotic relationship between the organization and the public, striving to cultivate good rapport, friendly relationship and healthy environment that is conducive for business existence, survival and its flourishing. On the other hand, the public will also have to respond to organization's effort in order to benefit from the organizations service or products. Grunig and Hunt 1984, sees it as a management function that surveys public opinion, outlines an organization's goals and objectives, and then implements a plan of action to win support and understanding from the general public. This underscores the place of the pubic and organization in the public relations domain. It is therefore an important components of every organization promotional mix, and refers to the wide range of activities carried out by companies to define and promote their images of which the public relations of Indoram Eleme petrochemical Limited is not an exemption.

The Indorama Eleme Petrochemical limited is a world class producer of fertilizers and textiles and also engages in the production of natural gas into range of products such as polytene, polypropylene (A thermoplastic resin made by polymerization, and used for films, fibres and moulding materials) and other basic chemicals. The business uses operations, organisational structures, quality assurance, environmental management, occupational health safety, and corporate communications and public relations to carry out its activities. The company has been in existence since early 2000. It appears that it has a cordial relationship with its public (internal and external). These cordial relationships could be attributed to the all-powerful dominance of public relations and its strategic activities in the company. The primary activities of the public relations in the company include, but not limited to developing and implementing strategies to communicate with the public through their various techniques, geared towards enhancing patronage and improving the image of the organization. Richard and Umor (2020). Thus, the goal of any public relations strategy is to create two-way communication while looking for areas of mutual interest or common ground, as well as to create understanding based on facts, knowledge, and complete information. Strategic communication management sets out the communication framework in an organization from one stakeholder to the other. It embodies planning, developing tactics, and conveying messages to the stakeholders in the most effective way (Wilcox & Cameron, 2005). This communication must be purposive, and flexible enough to allow feedback. It is such feedback mechanism that enables the organization to note relevant areas of common interest on which basic understanding should be established.

Rie-Van (2000) emphasizes that through public relations communication strategies, organization deliberately share what their identity is, their qualities, insights, and most importantly their errors, showing up were noticeable while drawing up with their publics. In drawing up with their publics, building and sustaining good image for the organization becomes the first priority for the public relations department, considering the fact that it is a major *Sin quo non* to an organization lasting success. Public relations teams are also responsible for the partnership's image and management interaction with the government, employees, and prospective and current investors. A company's ultimate goal is to communicate in an efficient and fruitful manner (Daramola 2003)

One of the key elements of public relations in every organization is stakeholders' engagement. Engagement of Stakeholders in public relations effort in every organization involves a two-way communication process between an organization and its stakeholders. The organization must actively seek input and feedback from stakeholders, and stakeholders must be willing to participate in discussions and provide their perspectives. Chukwu (2015), in his study highlighted the task of building good public relations, noting that, it can only be achieved with the use of appropriate strategies. Considering the present day fast-paced business world, public relations strategies is all powerful in shaping the reputation of an organization. Public relations officers typically face significant obstacles during organisational crises since their primary focus is on being proactive to surmount any likely crises rather than repairing the organization's damaged or tarnished reputation when its escalation.

Restoring mutual understanding between an organisation and its external publics is the only way to repair harm to an organization's image or reputation (Ajaja, 2015). It is worthy to note that the public relations strategies employ by an organization will either affect positively or negatively the reputation of the organization. Hence, the public relation practitioner (s) must be diplomatic in its strategies to maintain the organization's images and in turn build strategic communication process that would enhance and build mutually beneficial relationship. Elliot (2010) argues that the public relations activities must involve a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationship between an organization and its public.

One important aspect of any public relations strategies is the ability to communicate effectively with key stakeholders. In communicating with these stakeholders, organizations can build strong relationship that will help them achieve their business objectives. The Indorama Eleme petrochemical Limited in her public relations strategies over the years and till date is currently adopting proactive strategies, as outlined by the Head of Corporate Communication/special advisor to managing Director Dr. Jossy Nwokocha, which include: Media Relations, stakeholders' engagements, Corporate Social Philanthroph, Customer Relations strategies Crisis Communication, and so on. Okunna (2002) identifies crisis communication activities to involve developing a crisis management plan, identifying key stakeholders and preparing key messages and communication materials.

To be successful in planning public relations practice and programmes, an organization needs to see how the public settles on choice and their perception to the organization's policies and programmes to enhance inclusive participation from the general public, that is to say, the policies programmes and actions of the organization must win the goodwill, sympathy, understanding and acceptance from the public.

Theoretical Review

This work draws from the notion of the stakeholder's theory, which was propounded by Richard Edward Freeman in 1984 (Freeman, 1984). The theory posits that organizations are interconnected with many stakeholders who can significantly impact their success or failure. Therefore, it is crucial for organizations to understand and respond to the needs and concerns of different stakeholder groups.

The theory stresses the assumption that organizations that are able to build strong relationships with their stakeholders are more likely to succeed in the long run. This theory is highly significant to the topic of discourse because it recognizes that organizations have multiple stakeholders who have legitimate interests in the organization's operations and actions, hence, determine the success or failure of such organization (Freeman, 1984). Critique of the theory has come from various scholars, including Jones (1995), who argued that the theory is too broad and does not provide sufficient guidance for managers. However, I argue that the stakeholder theory remains a crucial framework for understanding the complex relationships between organizations and their stakeholders

In relation to the theory, Public Relations practitioners can develop more effective communication strategies that take into account the needs and concerns of all stakeholders. This can help to build trust, strengthen relationships, and enhance the organization's reputation with its various stakeholders (Grunig, 1992). Through effective engagement with stakeholders in a meaningful way, PR professionals can also gain valuable insights into their perceptions and expectations of the organization, which can inform future decision-making and strategic planning.

Public Relations Overview

Public relation is a major entity in every organization which both are in separable, geared towards achieving set objectives /goal in managing organization / host communicates affairs. due to certain claims and misunderstandings that misleading information is portrayed by public relations or that it is considered propaganda. Thus, a request was made to hold an open-door conversation or seminar on the topic. This can help dispel some confusion about what constitutes proper public relations practice.

The following definition was developed by thirty national and regional public relations agencies in Mexico City in 1978 as a result of this wrongdoing or misunderstanding, according to Ajala (1993:9). Public relations are the purposefully planned and ongoing endeavour to create and preserve mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics, according to Jerkins

(1985:155). Marston (1978) believes that the management function of public relations is responsible for assessing public opinion, determining which organization's policies and practices are of public interest, and carrying out a communication and action plan to win over the public to one's point of view.

According to the Nigeria Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) public relations is a planned, cyclic and interactive process which involves actions, inactions and reactions from either the organization or the public's and their effects. Idemili (1993) notes that public relations is the act of explaining an organization's policies and actions thereby bringing about public understanding through communication.

The management function known as public relations is responsible for creating and preserving the kind of mutually beneficial connections that determine an organization's success or failure with the general public. BROON (2009), p. 7. The art and science of public relations include trend analysis, trend prediction, organisation counselling, leadership development, and the implementation of a planned course of action that will benefit the organisation and the general public.

In his own concept, Sam Black placed equal emphasis on communication, which included writing for public relations. According to him, the field of public relations involves creating a mutually beneficial climate through two-way communication, resolving conflicts of interest, and establishing understanding based on facts, knowledge, and complete information.

Overview of Indorama Eleme petrochemical limited

The Indorama Eleme petrochemical limited (I.E.P.L) was founded by S. P Lohia and Established in the year 1990 under the name Eleme Petrochemicals Company Limited (EPCL) as the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation's (NNPC) solely owned subsidiary, in order to satisfy the continent's growing need for plastic resins. Indorama emerged as the principal investor and purchased EPCL in 2006 when the National Council for Privatisation, an agency under the Federal Government of Nigeria, announced the privatisation of the company.

Later, in June 2012, the business changed its name to Indorama Eleme Petrochemicals Limited. In West Africa, Indorama Eleme Petrochemical Limited is thought to be the biggest manufacturer of olefins and polyolefin plastics. It is Nigeria's only manufacturer of polyolefins, which are essential to the country's downstream plastics sector. Situated on an expansive industrial park spanning over 300 hectares, the petrochemical complex is complemented by a captive power plant, storage tanks, warehouses, and utilities. The complex is made up of a polyethylene factory that produces LLDPE and HDPE, a polypropylene plant, and a mixed feed ethylene cracker facility. Natural Gas Liquids (NGL), which are delivered by pipeline from a gas separation facility, serve as the primary feedstock. A nearby refinery provides propylene rich feed (PRF) as a supplement. Every year, IPL manufactures more over 300,000 tonnes of PE and PP resins, the most of which are sold on the home market.

The petrochemical complex comprises various units, including an Ethylene plant, a Propylene plant, a Polyethylene plant, a Polypropylene plant, and a Low-density polyethylene plant. The Ethylene plant has a production capacity of 750,000 metric tonnes of Ethylene per annum, making it one of the largest in Africa. The Propylene plant has a capacity of 255,000 metric tonnes per annum, while the Polyethylene plant has a capacity of 430,000 metric tonnes per annum. The Polypropylene plant has a capacity of 185,000 metric tonnes per annum, while the Low-density Polyethylene plant has a capacity of 70,000 metric tonnes per annum (Richard & Harcourt, 2022). The company's products are used in various industries, including packaging, agriculture, automotive, construction, and healthcare.

Umoh (2002), emphasizes that Its products have received several certifications, including ISO 9001, ISO 14001, and OHSAS 18001, demonstrating its commitment to quality, environment, and safety. The company is also known for its corporate social responsibility initiatives, aimed at improving the lives of local communities in the areas of education, health, and infrastructure development. Through its corporate social responsibility programs, the company has built schools, hospitals, and roads in various communities around its operations. In 2019 for instance, The Indorama Eleme Petrochemical Limited donated a fully equipped hospital to the Nigerian Army, as part of its commitment to supporting the country's military. The company has also partnered with various government agencies and non-governmental organizations to implement various development projects in Nigeria. No doubt, the company remains a significant contributor to Nigeria's economy, employing over 7,000 people directly and indirectly, and generating revenues of over \$780 million in 2018. Its operations have also helped to boost Nigeria's petrochemical industry, reducing the country's dependence on imports and creating opportunities for local businesses. The company has also received several accolades for its performance, including the 'African Company of the Year' award at the Africa CEO Forum in 2018.

Empirical Review

Ihunwo, et al. (2021) research looked at Indorama Eleme Petrochemical Limited's sustainable community relations and corporate communication strategy. Four goals and four corresponding research questions were used by the researchers. The researchers used the theories of stakeholders and corporate communication to assist provide the study academic credibility. Nevertheless, using a survey as the research design, they meticulously conducted their investigation on the six host villages of Indorama Elem Petrochemical Limited, which is predicted to have a population of over 74,240. The researcher used a hybrid strategy, collecting data through interviews and questionnaires. According to the study's findings, a firm's corporate communication tactics were a significant influence in improving the company's ability to foster sustainable community connections as well as the existing state of mutual understanding and harmony between the company and host communities.

However, the relationship between the Reviewed work and current study is that, both emphasizes on public relations strategies/ techniques employed by organization with emphasis on same company (Indorama Eleme petrochemical limited). While the reviewed study was narrowed to corporate communication strategies with emphasis with community relations, the current work emphasizes on assessing the public relations techniques in the company. After establishing it findings, the reviewed work fails to provide adequate recommendations to give credence to their findings and also improve on further research. But the current discourse provides four scholarly Recommendations to the study that will help improve on existing and further studies.

Nwosu (2015) study examines the public relations strategies employed by oil and gas companies in Nigeria during crisis situations. The findings of this study are relevant to the current discourse as they highlight the importance of effective public relations strategies in managing crisis situations in the oil and gas industry. This study's findings can be applied to Indorama Eleme Petrochemical Limited's public relations strategies in managing crisis situations.

Okoro (2017) investigates the relationship between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and stakeholder engagement in the Nigerian oil and gas industry. The findings of this study are relevant to the current discourse as they highlight the importance of CSR and stakeholder engagement in building positive relationships between oil and gas companies and their stakeholders. This study's findings can be applied to Indorama Eleme Petrochemical Limited's CSR initiatives and stakeholder engagement strategies.

Ogbu (2019) assessed the public relations and crisis communication strategies employed by Shell Petroleum Development Company in Nigeria during a crisis situation. The findings of this study are relevant to the current discourse as they highlight the importance of effective public relations and crisis communication strategies in managing crisis situations in the oil and gas industry. This study's findings can be applied to Indorama Eleme Petrochemical Limited's public relations and crisis communication strategies.

Methodology

This study employed mixed methods, with emphasis on the quantitative survey research design, using a simple random sampling approach. The target population consisted of employees and stakeholders of Indorama Eleme Petrochemical Limited, totaling over 1500 individuals. A sample size of 306 was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan sampling table. A structured questionnaire was designed to collect data from respondents. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section A deals with the demographic analyses of respondents while section B deals with the psychographic analyses. The research instrument was well structured and scrutinized by a research expert. The Validity of the instrument was ensured through content validation of 2.85. of which experts reviewed the questionnaire to ensure that it accurately measured the constructs of interest. The questionnaire was administered to respondents through a combination of online and offline methods. Respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity to encourage honest responses. Collected data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Specifically, the frequency distributions. However, three hundred and six (306) administered questionnaires were distributed and 285 were retrieved and properly filled by the respondents, while 21 questionnaires were not returned and few discarded due to respondents' error. Therefore, the 285 returned questionnaires will be bases for the data presentation. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics of percentage, measure of central tendency, and Weighted mean score.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Sex Distribution of Respondents

Sex	Option	Frequency
Male	180	63.2
Female	105	36.8
Total	285	100%

Source: Researchers' Field survey 2024

The Table 1 shows that, greater percentage (63.2%) representing 180 respondents were male while lesser percentage (36.8%) representing 105 respondents were female.

Table 2: Official Status of Respondents

Official Status	Frequency	Percentage
Management	11	3.9
Senior staff	123	43.1
Junior Staff	100	35.1
Casual staff	51	17.9
Total	285	100%

Source: Researchers' Field Survey 2024

The Table 2 shows that greater percentage of (43.1%) representing 123 respondents are senior staffs, while lesser percentage of (3.9%) representing 11 respondents are amongst the management team.

Table 3: Effective Public Relations Techniques of Indorama Eleme Plc: Employees and Stakeholders Feedback

Item	4 SA	3 A	2 SD	1 D	WMS	Decision
Media Relations	201	33	22	29	3.42	Accepted
	804	99	44	29		
		976				
		285		= 342		
Press Release	200	45	20	20	3.49	Accepted
	800	135	40	20		
		995				
		285		= 3.49		
Social Media Platforms and inside Eleme Newspaper	193	45	38	9	3.50	Accepted
	772	135	76	9		
		997				
		285		= 3.50		
Community Involvement	122	97	35	31	3.1	Accepted
	488	291	70	31		
		880				
		285		= 3.1		

Source: Researchers' Field Survey, 2024

Table 4: Challenges of Indorama Eleme Petrochemical Limited on Implementation of Public Relations Strategies

Item	4 SA	3 A	2 SD	1 D	WMS	Decision
	150 600	32 96	61 122	42 42	3.0	Accepted
Negative Public Perception and Challenge of Choosing the Right Media		860 285		= 3.0		
	200 800	50 100	5 10	30 30	3.29	Accepted
Limited Resources in Implementing Effective P.R Strategies; that is, Finance, Time, and Expertise		940 285	= 3.29			
Lack of Customer's Engagement and Inability to Balance Transparency.	111 444	87 261	60 120	27 27	2.99	Accepted
		852 285	= 2.99			
	85 340	86 558	10 20	3 3	3.23	Accepted
Lack of Awareness or Understanding by the Audience on the Company's P.R Initiatives and the Challenge of Choosing the Right Media		921 285	= 3.23			

Source: Researchers' Field Survey, 2024

From the Table 4, it is clearly reviewed that Indorama Eleme Petrochemical Limited faces challenges in implementing their public relations strategies of which they can also strategize to surmount it.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research on public relations strategies in the oil and gas industry. Ihunwo, Richard, and Harcourt (2021) found that corporate communication strategies play a significant role in improving sustainable community relations and mutual understanding between companies and host communities. Similarly, this study found that effective public relations strategies are crucial in managing crisis situations and building positive relationships with stakeholders in the oil and gas industry. The findings of this study also support the importance of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and stakeholder engagement in building positive relationships between oil and gas companies and their stakeholders (Okoro, 2017). The study found that Indorama Eleme Petrochemical Limited's CSR initiatives and stakeholder engagement strategies are critical in building trust and credibility with its stakeholders. The study found that Indorama Eleme Petrochemical Limited's

public relations and crisis communication strategies are critical in managing crisis situations and protecting its reputation; it is in agreement with Ogbu (2019) and Nwosu (2015).

Conclusion

The study assesses public relations strategies in Indorama Eleme Petrochemical limited. So far, the researcher's findings revealed that the relative peace and smooth working environment enjoyed by Indorama Eleme Petrochemical Limited, her workers and stakeholders are all products of the various public relations techniques of the company. If the public relations department of the company are better managed and reformed by improving its innovative in all ramifications, the company will definitely avert any crises situations.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendation were made:

- i. Indorama Eleme Petrochemical Limited should be more concern and focus more on its various social media platforms considering its wide traffic, locally and internationally. This can help the public relations department leverage on it to amplify the organization message and engage their target audience.
- ii. Despite the challenges faced by the company in implementing public relations techniques, it is recommended that, to avert these, the public relations officer/units should understand the company's goals, values, and target audience, enhance internal communication (vertically and horizontally). In doing these, the organization will to some extent surmount the challenges.

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