

Uses of New Technologies by Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) Public Relations Department in Managing their Corporate Brand

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Abstract

The article focuses on the uses of new technologies by Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) public relations department in managing their corporate brand. The major objectives of the study was to find out the uses of new technologies used by ZBC PR department from 2013 to 2014 in managing their corporate brand. The study is related to the theme of the conference, since it focused on emerging trends such as mobile phone, E-mail, Face book, Twitter, What's app and the Website used by ZBC PR department to communicate with its internal and external publics. These technologies were used by ZBC for disaster management after it faced economic challenges made possible by the economic melt-down faced by the country which affected the normal operation of the public broadcasting station like ZBC from 2013 to 2014. The merging of the computer and the internet created the digital public sphere where citizens share views instantly without restrictions across the globe. The study would use a postmodern approach to PR that focuses on PR as institutional process and its role in organisational discourses. Post modernism would enable to link knowledge and power, dis-sensus rather than consensus. Again it merged power and ideology, the concept of hyper reality and the challenge to rationality. Data gathering methods used in the study are face to face structured interviews, questionnaires and participant observation. These were subjected to both qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis. Qualitative and quantitative research designed enabled the researchers to attain information closer to reliability and validity. Theoretical framework that informed the study includes two way communication theory, social cognitive dissonance theory and electronic colonialism theory. This research found out that PR department at ZBC uses multiple new media technologies and social media for brand management. The study also indicates how ZBC PR department practices excellent PR, with their publics using new technologies.

Keywords: corporate brand, corporation communication, corporate image, new technology, digital age and excellent public relation public

INTRODUCTION

Communication is the life blood of organisations; hence there is need for strategic communication for the organisation to survive. If not effectively practiced, communication destroys the organisation's image and reputation, (Cutlip, Center and Broom, 2000). Public relations (PR) oils the corporate engine, serves money and time, (Reddi, 2009). PR is a management junction of continuous and planned character which contribute to organisation's securing and sustaining the understanding, sympathy and support of entities that the organisation is interested or may be interested in the future (Tworzydlo 2009,p. 4). The term "brand" can be defined as a "name", term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from other sellers (Skinner 1994, p. 324).The study seeks to explore the uses of new technologies by the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC)'s public relations department in managing their corporate

brand. The major issues to be addressed in this article are as follows; the extent to which ZBC public relations department uses new technologies to enhance the corporate brand. The article also identified the new technologies used by ZBC public relations department to enhance their corporate brand, the effect that new technologies have to assist in sustaining the corporate brand. The study limited itself on the role played by new technologies at ZBC, particularly in the PR department from 2013 to 2014 to manage the broadcasting organisation image and reputation. Again the study contributes immensely to the knowledge gap in response to the conference theme as it looked at the relevance of new technologies in the practice of excellent PR. In addition, this study provides room for PR practitioners to understand effective corporate communication and excellent PR in the digital era. New technologies were used in Zimbabwe by public

broadcasting station ZBC PR department to sustain effective communication and for dialoguing with clients local and international.

Theories informing this study are the two-way and symmetrical model of communication, the social cognitive dissonance theory of mass communication and the electronic colonialism theory. These theories are vital to this study as it focuses on the uses of new technologies in public relations to enhance a corporate brand. The two-way and symmetrical model of communication state that organizations develop mutual understanding with their publics through dialogue, Masuku and Shava 2014, p. 18). The organization and its publics share information hence relevant to corporate branding. The social cognitive dissonance theory deals with the manipulation of human mind to take a positive action towards an organization hence relevance to the study as it tackles issues of corporate branding, (Abrahams, 1995). The electronic colonialism theory looks at how the new information technologies are used to capture the minds of customers, (McPhail, 2010). This theory is applicable to this study as it looks on the use of new technologies by ZBC PR department in to enhance their corporate brand. The study is significant to the research theme that deals with “National Sustainable Development Strategy “since it focuses on the use of new technologies by ZBC in Zimbabwe to improve effective dialogical communication. Communication used by ZBC was meant to keep the nation health and to enhance sustainability between the organisation (ZBC) and its stakeholders as a development strategy.

Background to the Study

Broadcasting in Zimbabwe transcendent modern day historic and political developments. Imperial Airways had installed a transmitter in Belvedere near where the Metrological Offices are located to provide radio guidance and weather reports to the few aircraft that flew over Salisbury now Harare, linking England and South Africa. He further states that three enthusiastic engineers employed by the Post Office then, sought permission to use the transmitter to inaugurate broadcasting in Southern Rhodesia. Thus, these creative engineers improvised a room into a studio. When power failed during a news presentation, candles or car headlights shining through an open door were used instead. Initially, emphasis was on signal strength rather than programme content. According to the ZBC data book, within four years transmission was coming from Umtali (Mutare), Salisbury (Harare), Gatoma (Kadoma), Gwelo (Gweru) and Bulawayo. The first broadcasting house was built at the post office building

along Manica Road in 1940. A year later, the first full time broadcaster was employed.

On the inception of ZBC in 1980, the public relations department was created. It serves as the corporate mouthpiece. This department organizes events for corporate brand visibility. More over it is the eye of the organization, thus it communicates with its internal and external publics towards an upgrade of its services. This is an organ which manages opportunities and threats to emerge that may impact the organization.

The Practice of Excellent Public Relations in the Digital Age

Excellent public relation’s is practised with both internal and external publics, (Cornellison, 2008). Publics need to be carefully handled for they have implications on the organisational image and reputation. Internal publics are employees of the organisation and external are its customers, (Grunig, 2009). However, he argues that public relations initiatives are not limited to publics alone but can be directed to stakeholders as well. Therefore, there is need for thorough research on the needs and wants of the public’s. Brand are evangelized, dismissed, measured and documented in real time, admonished business to “join conversation” in social media, “a mission perfectly suited for the PR professionals (Winehell 2010, p.10). The brand affects consumers attitude and perceptions towards the product and is applicable to PR, towards the organisation that produces the products (Prindle 2011, p.32).

The strengthen of two way communication in this study is that it emphasises equality in the communication process. The social cognitive theory as propagated by Bandura (2001) provides an agnatic conceptual framework within which to analyse the determinants and psychosocial mechanisms through which symbolic communication influences human thought, affect and action. Moreover, the study is also informed by the Electronic Colonialism theory in that it would look at whether ZBC PR department allows open views with its publics pertaining its programmes.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant to media and communication, since it focuses on various social network sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp and website that can be used as tools for national sustainable development strategies. In the study it can be observed that ZBC in Zimbabwe through its public relations department uses social network sites for effective communication with the stakeholders. Communication is important to keep the organisation health and well informed. Social media cut across the geographical boundaries and is dialogical

as it enables all stakeholders to provide feedback to what ZBC would have communicated. Use of Social media for branding can be perceived as national sustainable development strategy as it made ZBC to be a reputable organisation that maintained the current communication trends that allows easy flow of information to the stakeholders.

METHODOLOGY

Research methodology is a systematic approach that is followed to solve a research problem. Methodology is a concept that systematically solves the research problem, (Kothari, 2004). It may be understood as a science of studying how research is done scientifically. He further explains that it consists of various steps that are generally adopted by a researcher in studying the research problem along with the logic behind them. Therefore, the researcher used qualitative and quantitative research because the study deals with social science issues that have to do with stakeholders who are human beings. Hence qualitative research is the most relevant as it addresses linguistic issues and employs meaning based forms of data analysis. Quantitative research was used to quantify the number of new media technologies used by ZBC from 2013 to 2014. Moreover, it is the appropriate approach in analysing people's behaviours, beliefs, opinions and emotions. One hundred questionnaires were distributed among ZBC employees (internal publics) and audiences (external publics). Forty questionnaires were given to forty ZBC employees and sixty were distributed among ZBC audiences.

The researcher also interviewed the ZBC PR manager Mr Gladman Bandama, four ZBC employees and five ZBC audiences. Out of forty questionnaires distributed to ZBC employees, thirty three were responded. Moreover, audiences responded to fifty seven questionnaires out of sixty which were distributed. A total of 90 questionnaires were answered and returned to the researcher, which is 90% response rate. Ten questionnaires were not returned as respondents said they were busy. The face-to-face interview response rate was 100%. The researcher's target was to interview the ZBC PR manager, four ZBC employees and five ZBC clients and he successfully interviewed them all face-to-face. The study also used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyse the use of new technologies by the

ZBC public relations department and the implications to the corporate brand. Critical discourse analysis articulates the power of language due to dominant ideas and cultural changes, (Bryman, 2012). This method seems to be appropriate in analysing discourses constructed by the ZBC public relations department through the new technologies and their implications to both internal and external public.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings of the study is in response to the key questions that sought to find out the extent to which ZBC public relations department uses new technologies to enhance the corporate brand. Again the study would investigate the new technologies used by ZBC public relations department to enhance their corporate brand. The influence and effectiveness of new technology in enhancing corporate image through the PR department at ZBC to reinforce their brand and the relevant in the practice of excellent public relations would be discussed. The prospects and challenges faced by ZBC public relations professionals in communicating with their publics using new technologies would be extensively assessed.

Communication Technologies used by ZBC to Communicate with all Publics

The findings of the study through interviews and questionnaires with the ZBC PR manager, ZBC internal and external publics revealed that the use of new technologies by the ZBC PR department has sustained the corporate brand. New technologies used by the ZBC PR department to communicate with internal and external publics are telephone, mobile phone, E-mail, Face book, Twitter, Whats app and the Website. The researcher observed that ZBC PR department also uses traditional channels of communication such as face-to-face, letters, notice boards and memos to communicate with the employees. However, because new technologies provide a space for instant responses, ZBC PR department most frequently uses new communication technologies to foster a mutual understanding with both internal and external publics. The pie chart below outlines new technologies used by ZBC PR department and the frequency these technologies are employed to communicate with ZBC publics.

Pie chart for communication tools used by Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC)



Pie chart 1

The above pie chart illustrates that the PR department at ZBC mostly utilises face book with 35% to communicate with their publics, on how the broadcaster can improve its products and services. Information gathered from interviews with the PR manager and ZBC publics highlights that the PR department uses face book most because a majority of ZBC audiences have access to face book than other new communication technology. Moreover, they argued that face book is the latter day public sphere where people freely express their concerns with no fear of arrest or torture, contributing to an excellent management of the ZBC brand. Findings from observation articulated that ZBC audiences share and discuss their opinions and perceptions towards a programme before, during and after transmission on the programme face book platform. Credit is given to new technologies which are interactive, as asserted by the electronic colonialism theory that with new technologies, citizens do not passively decode text; they participate through sharing, commenting and arguing about the text. Thus, feedback is of paramount importance in corporate in improving ZBC programming.

E-mails have 17% usage frequency, and are used to communicate with both internal and external publics. Advertisers, sponsors, other media organisations and ZBC audiences use this platform to share information that can improve the image of the organisation. Judging from the interviews conducted with ZBC PR manager, Mr Bandama and ZBC producers outlined that every programme has an email address on which audiences are asked to comment and contribute towards the improvement of the programme. The aim is to gratify audiences’ needs of being entertained, informed and educated through ZBC. Satisfying audiences’ needs clearly marks an upgrade on the corporate reputation.

Research findings through face-to-face interviews, questionnaires and observation from ZBC employees and audiences reflect that new technologies such as Whats app, Twitter, Face book, E-mails and the Website

are the most preferred communication channels at ZBC which enables PR practitioners to boost the corporate image. They dominate other channels because they have a greater degree of symmetrical communication which is advocated for in the practice of effective corporate communication, (Grunig, 2009). “Two-way, symmetrical public relations use research, listening, and dialogue to manage conflict and to cultivate relationships with both internal and external strategic publics more than one-way and asymmetrical communication” (Grunig, 2009, p. 2).

The Importance of New Technologies in Corporate Branding

Data collected through questionnaires and interviews from ZBC employees and audiences reflects that the ZBC PR department utilises new technologies in managing the corporate brand. The researchers also observed that the ZBC brand stands firm in the competitive media landscape due to persuasive communication using new technologies such as Whats app, Twitter, Face book, the Website, telephone and mobile phone. New information technologies promote diversity of information hence becomes the most effective instrument of public relations, influencing all segments of the public namely shareholders, employees, customers, suppliers, general community and the media public, (Grunig, 2009, p. 18). The researcher through questionnaires discovered that the PR professionals at ZBC, employees and ZBC external publics embrace the importance of new technologies in creating and managing relationships in the society. This is supported by the electronic colonialism theory which asserts that the information revolution hijacked the socialisation process from families and placed it in the new power of new technologies on which people create relations and interact globally (McPhail, 2010).

Information collected using questionnaires from ZBC internal and external publics highlighted that PR practitioners who utilise new technologies in corporate communication gain a huge market which results in massive capital inflow to the organisation. Responding to the questions on the advantages and the

disadvantages of using new technologies in corporate branding, a majority said due to the proliferation of new technologies, they influence the day to day lives of people in terms of socialisation and information sharing. Thus the social cognitive dissonance theory of mass communication should alter consumers' perceptions, attitudes and behaviours towards a brand so that when they decide to buy there is no time for evaluation, (Bandura, 2001). Table 1 below illustrates the response levels from interviews and questionnaires on the advantages and disadvantages of using new technologies by ZBC PR practitioners for corporate branding.

Data Collection Methods used in the study and total respondents

Table 1

Method	Total respondents	New technologies are important in managing the ZBC brand.	New technologies are not important in managing the ZBC brand.
Questionnaire	90	77	13
Face-to-face interview	10	10	0
Total	100	87	13

The table above shows publics' response levels on the importance of using new technologies by the ZBC PR department to enhance the corporate brand. Out of 90 questionnaires answered by ZBC publics, 77 which is 85.6 % said new technologies are important in ZBC branding while 13 which is 14.4% contradicted the view. Through interviews, all 10 respondents which is a 100% agreed to the view that new technologies are important in managing the ZBC brand. On overall, out of 100 respondents 87 which is 87% highlighted that new technologies are important in managing the ZBC brand, while 13 respondents which is 13% rejected the view.

Judging from the responses elicited from ZBC external publics through questionnaires, the PR department at ZBC managed to revitalise the corporate brand using new technologies. They created loyalty to the ZBC brand by communicating the value of ZBC to Zimbabweans. Relating this statement to ZBC programming, individuals would argue that ZBC programmes safeguard the Zimbabwean culture from being dominated by Western culture.

The Importance of Public Relations in Corporate Branding

The PR manager at ZBC through an interview with the researcher highlighted that in the digital era, corporate branding is a key tool to upgrade the image of an organisation. Using the data collected through an interview with the PR manager, the public relations department is responsible for the reinforcement of the ZBC brand. Mr Bandama stated that the PR department create and maintain beneficial relations with all ZBC publics ranging from audiences, advertisers, funders, employees and the executive. He acknowledged that the marketing department assist in marketing the corporate brand, but he however argued that their relations are limited to advertisers.

New technologies enabled ZBC PR practitioners to identify, anticipate and satisfy the needs of their publics. Findings from questionnaires with both internal and external publics revealed that the advantage of using new technologies in the practice of public relations is it allows PR practitioners to effectively research their markets. Through Face book, Twitter, Whats app, the Website, Telephone and mobile phone, audiences send their complaints to ZBC. The PR department analyse these comments advice employees to improve in the areas that audiences allude to. However, the researcher observed that ZBC do not satisfy some of the needs of the audiences due to use obsolete equipment which produce poor picture quality. Moreover, the corporation is controlled by ZANU PF hence it remains disseminating the party's ideologies.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study focus was on the uses of new technologies by the ZBC PR department in managing their corporate brand. It explored the extent to which ZBC PR practitioners successfully enhance their corporate brand using new technologies in their daily practices. Furthermore, new technologies employed by the ZBC PR department to communicate with both internal and external publics namely E-mail, Whats app, Twitter, Face book, the Website, telephone and mobile phone were outlined in this research. The study found out that ZBC has various departments with several employees which are not easily reached through face-to-face communication. PR professionals at ZBC are responsible of maintaining a mutual and beneficial relationship with these internal publics to achieve organisational goals and objectives. The study findings indicate that the PR department at ZBC calls heads of department daily acquiring information on the conduct of employees. From the general findings of the study the researcher recommends that ZBC PR department should use new media technologies alternatively to suits the

needs of all their stakeholders who can either be internal or external. Again PR department at ZBC should practice excellent PR to enhance their effective communication with stakeholders using social network sites and new media technologies. All messages should be coded in three main languages that is English, chiShona and isiNdebele for brand management. In addition, the study recommends that the PR department at ZBC should open Whats app, Website, Twitter and Face book that are administered within the department to promote effective corporate communication with their client

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