

CONSTRAINTS TO INTERNET USE FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS FUNCTIONS BY SELECTED KENYAN ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT: *Public Relations has gained increasing organizational importance in recent times, as it has been emphasized in various platforms. A review of current literature shows that the use of the Internet for PR in organizations has been empirically investigated mainly in other contexts – especially in Europe and America – but not in Africa. However, most of these investigations focused on specific components of Internet and not the holistic use of the Internet for PR. The study examined the constraints to the use of Internet as a PR platform in organizations. It adopted a relativist-interpretivist research paradigm and a qualitative approach utilizing the multiple case study method. A total of 45 participants was sampled comprising nine respondents each from a financial, telecommunications, insurance, PR Agency and online shopping business. In each category of business, one person in management, two PR and communications experts (or customer care services marketing and advertising in some organizations), one ICT expert and five key stakeholders (key public-internal/external customers) was selected. The PR organizations involved in the study were sampled purposively. In-depth interviews, observation and document analysis were used to generate data. Data analysis was done thematically. Among the constraints of Internet as a PR platform in organizations were security and trust concerns, content mismanagement, lack of tools of monitoring and evaluation, ineffective utilization of the platforms, lack of expert knowledge, experience and poor role specification. Evidently, numerous constraints impair the utilization of Internet for PR functions in most organizations. As such, it was recommended that PR practitioners should develop internet plans to bolster interactivity and utilize social media services fully to produce effective messages to strengthen organisation-public relationships.*

KEYWORDS: Constraints, Internet Use, Public Relations Functions, Kenya, Organizations

INTRODUCTION

The growth of the internet and the World Wide Web has further blurred the boundaries between communicators in any context. The computers have redefined many of the features of communication in general. More people are communicating by means of mechanically assisted platforms that allow the source and receivers to exchange information. The internet can also extend the range of messages by amplifying it and transmitting it over large distance. The Internet has provided and improved the means for communication among individuals and organizations making it one of the most successful medium of reaching the audience. The role of communication in the modern workplace has been the focus of many discussions in the past. The purpose of organizational communication has shifted from a one-way publicity model as described earlier by Gruing and Gruing (1984), to a two-way symmetrical communication paradigm. The internet presents a platform where people and organizations can communicate through Internet-based platforms where people and organizations are able to engage each other by communicating and sharing information through websites, emails

and social media. The internet has developed into a reality that modern communicators cannot ignore.

Communication is about the management of relationships while contributing directly to the bottom line of the organizations overall goals. With the changing dynamics, PR specialists have to secure the expertise of modern social communication strategists including bloggers, Internet specialists, and social media experts to continue maintaining organizations' positive image. Organizations can invest in communication dynamic platforms provided for by the Internet such as social media to boost their PR functions and enabling the PR experts to create a strong rapport that would benefit the organization. Some of the aspects that organizations can learn include full integration of the firms' structures with the PR functions, facilitating user co-creation of PR messages, creation of perpetual vigilance, and hyper-localizing PR activities.

Constraints to Internet Use in PR

The fact that practitioners were undecided about how the Internet impacted on media relations suggests that they were possibly unsure about the value of the Internet during this time. In addition, the results of a research by Taylor and Perry (2005) who conducted a series of four studies in 1998, 1999, 2000 and 2003 to examine how organisations used the Internet for crisis communication revealed that practitioners were equally uncertain of the value of the Internet for this function of Public Relations. They drew their sample of 1992 crises by monitoring US based news channels – CNN and MSNBC. According to Sandilands (2009), crisis communication in Public Relations implies:

...swiftly coordinating the organisation's response, advising and training spokespeople, often being the spokesperson, managing the critically important media liaison, keeping a close eye on public reaction and opinion, to orchestrating communication with a wide range of publics like investors, clients, employees and at times, angry or grieving members of the public (p. 105).

The Internet can both facilitate or trigger a crisis as well as aid in mitigating or managing one (Middleberg, 2001; Holtz, 2002; Alfonso & Smith, 2008; Breakeyridge, 2008; Sandilands, 2009). This explains why PR is a critical factor in crisis communication. In contrast, the study by Taylor and Perry (2005) found that the Public Relations practitioners had not yet identified the value of the Internet in crisis communication. It was further found that wherever the organizations included the Internet as part of their crisis communication plan, they relied on tactics such as uploading news releases and fact sheets (which have been labelled as 'traditional tactics' by the researchers), rather than using it to facilitate a two-way conversation with their target publics (Taylor & Perry, 2005).

Studies examining the extent of Internet usage in Public Relations date back to the late 1990s when an independent Los Angeles based Public Relations agency called 'The Bohle Company' published a report that included results of a survey of 334 American practitioners. The results of the study showed that 95% of the respondents used e-mail extensively (The Bohle Company, 1998). This suggested that e-mail had already become commonplace in the PR practice at the time.

Around the same period, Esrock and Leighty (1999) examined a sample of 100 websites drawn from the list of Fortune 500 companies in the US and found that 90% of the companies

had a website and the majority of them were targeted at the investors, customers and the media. It was further identified that while the websites attempted to target the media, they failed to include media contacts and search tools, making it difficult for reporters to locate information. Esrock and Leighty (1999) suggest that it is likely that the websites were not managed by Public Relations practitioners but by technical or marketing staff and therefore were not efficient at servicing media requirements. They used the same assumption to explain why the websites were not used to proactively engage with the publics but only as a medium of information dissemination similar to traditional channels such as print and broadcast.

Since Esrock and Leighty (1999) never presented evidence in their study to validate the view that Public Relations practitioners were not involved in managing the websites, it cannot be completely ruled out that the practitioners themselves might have been unsure of how best to utilize websites. The ineffective use of websites as revealed in the study by Esrock and Leighty could be attributed to the fact that websites were still relatively new concepts as the Web itself had developed post 1995.

Therefore, it is likely that the top management of organizations and Public Relations practitioners at that time had not completely identified the Web's scope as a medium for the ideal two-way symmetrical communication advocated by theorists such as Grunig (1992). A study by Thorsteinsson (2000) to assess whether the Internet could facilitate two-way symmetrical communication interviewed four Public Relations practitioners from the UK and Iceland and one tutor from Manchester Metropolitan University. The results revealed that while the practitioners acknowledged the possibility of using the Internet for asymmetrical communication models press-agentry, information dissemination and two-way asymmetrical, they could not comprehend how it could be used to facilitate symmetrical dialogue with their publics (Thorsteinsson, 2000). His study evidenced that practitioners at that time felt that they lacked the fundamental understanding of the Internet as a medium of communication and what implications it held for their practice (Thorsteinsson, 2000). It can be argued that the small sample size of the above study acts as a considerable limitation in the generalization of the results.

Though, a study conducted in the UK that covered a wider sample of senior Public Relations practitioners across the country validates the interpretations made by Thorsteinsson (2000). This study cited by Stuntebeck (2002) was conducted by the Institute of Public Relations (IPR) in 1997 and found that while 89% of practitioners agreed that the Internet will affect communications/Public Relations, 26% were still undecided about its impact on media relations and 30% felt that there had been no impact at all. Media relations entails maintaining relationships with the media to gain support for one's organisation (Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, Toth & Leuven, 2004) and is widely acknowledged to be an important Public Relations function (Wilcox, Ault, Agee & Cameron, 2000; Lattimore *et al.*, 2004; Broom, 2009).

Taylor and Perry (2005) further observed that only 22 of the total 92 organizations studied followed a two-way communication approach, with no significant increase in the number of organisations between October 1998 and October 2003. All the above studies (Esrock & Leighty, 1999; Thorsteinsson, 2000; Stuntebeck, 2002; Taylor & Perry, 2005) show that during the initial years of the Internet's usage in Public Relations, the practitioners were largely unaware of the value of the Internet and the scope of its application in the practice.

Statement of the Problem

Academically, studies shows that use of Internet for PR in organizations has been empirically investigated in other contexts, especially in Europe and America but not in Africa. Furthermore, most such investigations carried out have tended to focus on specific components of Internet and not the holistic use of the Internet for PR. According to Broom, Casey and Ritchey (2000), PR is still clearly lacking in conceptualization and without clearly explained concepts, researchers have tough work conducting empirical observations and construct meaningful theory. Presumably for this reason, the majority of past research in the area is descriptive leaving a gap in explaining the actual activities observed in organizations.

The phenomenon of Internet and PR practice has not been widely explored in Africa and specifically Kenya despite the region showing tremendous potential and growth of Public Relations. The only few African counties that have been studied in connection with Public Relations are South Africa (Holtzhausen, Petersen & Tindall, 2003), Nigeria (Molleda & Alhassan, 2006), and Ghana, (Wu & Baah-Boakye, 2009). There is, however, some research that has been conducted by PR consultants and corporate organizations which, unfortunately, remains in private custody thus rarely influencing the direction of the practice in Kenya (Mbeke, 2009). Besides, most investigations identified focused on effects or impact of specific Internet communication tools such as twitter, blogs and other social media platforms on PR practice.

Despite the high presence of Internet across the world, many businesses still do not engage it for social communications. The social context of the study focused on benefits and challenges to the society that accrue from using the Internet and other social media platforms for information access. The social media presents a platform where individuals and organizations can engage in exchange of information and newsfeed. The introduction of Twitter, Google Plus, Pinterest, LinkedIn and Facebook among other platforms revolved channels of communication in the society. Majority of organizations using the Internet platforms have the intentions of expanding and consolidating the existing customer bases.

Although all types of organizations may benefit from communicating with publics through the Web, this can only happen if the internet provisions in such organizations are harnessed to enhance relations between organizations and their publics. There are documented cases of very poor relations between organizations and their publics. Organizations need to adopt some measures to ensure that the reputation of their organizations' products and services are enhanced, at the same time establish and sustain mutual relationship with their public. One prominent way organizations globally can achieve this is through good Public Relations (PR).

Studying the communication potential and constraints of the Internet is important because many organizations often lack expertise and sophistication in their Public Relations efforts. The Internet may be one of the best channels for organizations to communicate their messages and build mutual and beneficial relations. One way that organizations can use the Internet to build relationships with publics is by fostering Internet based communication platforms for dialogic communication. Esrock and Leighty (1999) suggest that it is likely that the websites were not managed by Public Relations practitioners but by technical or marketing staff and therefore were not efficient at servicing media requirements.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative-interpretivist multiple case study research design. The research targeted individual experts, professionals with experience in five organizations using non-probability sampling technique. The research was conducted in Nairobi where the selected organizations were headquartered. The categories of organizations included: One financial institution, a telecommunications company, a health insurance fund, a public relations and communications agency and one online shopping business. The table below shows the sampling frame of the study.

Table 1: Sample Frame

Respondents	Organizations					Total
	Financial	Telecomm	Insurance	PR Agency	Online shopping business	
Management	1	1	1	1	1	5
PR and Communications experts / Customer Care services Marketing and Advertising	2	2	2	2	2	10
ICT Experts	1	1	1	1	1	5
Stake holders (key publics-internal/external customers)	5	5	5	5	5	25
Total	9	9	9	9	9	45

In the study, three techniques of data generation were used, namely in-depth interviews, observation and document analysis. The data recorded from interviews and observations was transcribed into written words. The data was then analysed thematically. The themes captured vital data in relation to the research questions and presented some patterned response within the set of data. After working out sets of themes were presented in a write-up of the report. Thematic analysis helped to pinpoint, record and examine patterns emerging from the collected data. From the data obtained through document analysis, replicable and valid inferences were drawn through interpreting and coding of textual materials.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study sought to identify constraints to the utilization of internet platforms for PR functions in organizations. The following revelations are presented in this section are as follows: Challenges of security and logging-in processes, Challenges of online information Management, Challenges of professional expertise ,Challenges of Connectivity Challenges of ineffective socialization.

Security and Logging-in Processes

The respondents said one of the major challenges the customers often raised had to do with the logging in process constraints, especially the security checks involved. They noted that the logging in process was complicated for some clients. For instance, one respondent explained that Twitter required one to be a handler and follower whereas Facebook tended to

be so open that organizations might fear to use it in formal communication. It was observed that some of the documented e-mails showed a disclaimer baring replies. In these e-mails, clients were instead given referral links which the respondents said customers did not like. They reported that clients preferred to give direct feedback via e-mail instead of logging into the website to provide comments or seek clarifications. Another issue that emerged from the findings had to do with security concerns in the use of online platforms. As one participant explained:

...Security is the main challenge in utilizing the internet platforms, the challenge comes in to users when they have to verify and put security checks that we have among very many other minor challenges like users complain that they do not know how to use certain platforms and links in referring sites (Rn4).

The staff ensures security controls and in one organization it was noted that internet platforms had security features tailored by the organisations to ensure security. The organization being a large institution the participants noted that they had departments that dealt with other forms of communication but other information had to be approved and critically looked at before posting online. The IT section was said to be mandated with maintenance and checking to see if all systems work.

Online Information Management

Utilization of the platforms was said to be basically successful, only that organizations had to deal with a lot of information and responses at the same time. Online information management was a challenge that emerged from most of the participants. PR professionals from the communication agency discussed that internet lacked space and information management making it very technical.

...The organization is large and implementation of online relations can be so challenging, people are used to the old methods of communication because they are equally reliable (Bn3). ...Challenges of internet utilization lies both on the users end to those information givers. Users need to know how to engage with online platforms, the organizations need to know why they are using the tools and weigh the benefits. Otherwise the platforms will just be available (Pn2). ...It is challenging for some customers to keep up with the process to the point of delivery. It involves serious internet engagement to the end (En2).

Nevertheless, Facebook was described as being more relatively useful in marketing of products and services. It served as an alternative platform for customer relations where the organizations' websites were overloaded.

Professional Expertise

One respondent stated that the online media was difficult to use, especially for online shopping, where users did not have sufficient technical know-how. He added that there was need for an appropriate strategy to provide professional knowledge on the applications of online media technologies for both the employees and the customers. Some of the skills that the respondents cited included graphic design and interpretation, research, navigation, backend management, analytics, optimization, data security, problem-solving and monitoring. Below are some of the views of the respondents regarding training:

...From ICT point, I can say that utilization of the internet communication platforms requires a lot of training and technical expert knowledge so that it is well utilized (En3). ...Employees lack the required training, or we can say we do not have competent people to work exclusively on internet platforms (Bn2). ...Internet utilization by organizations is very challenging because of the methods and procedures involved from content creation to graphic designs that are required. It is challenging if you don't have professionals to do that (Pn1).

Most of the respondents agreed that the online PR procedures and technical processes required in-depth knowledge of information and web-based technologies. The respondents from the communication agency said they were trained regularly on Internet communication. However, they observed that there was need for continuous learning and training due to rapid nature of technological advancements.

Internet Connectivity

Most of the respondents cited Google+ as the most difficult platforms to connect to and navigate through, especially in places with weak internet connectivity. The respondents said connectivity dealys discouraged many customers from accessing PR-related information online. As shown in the statements below, connectivity constraints was also linked to the level of knowledge needed to resolve technological problems on the online platforms.

Utilization of the internet is only available to those who can access connectivity, those people who can use internet and to those customers with e-commerce knowledge and with individuals who wish to explore sales online because of the reduction costs involved (En4). ... The difficulties in utilization is seen on the number of people connected because not most people would be able to access the Internet and not all members would see the information put on the website Bn1. ...The ICT department has a lot to deal with in terms of enabling people to utilize our platforms, and the challenges we get on utilization is network connectivity, availability of apps which our clients need to utilize the platforms online (Ln4).

Ineffective and Inappropriate Socialization

Individuals feel free on the internet. The internet affords people the opportunity to express themselves freely with little regard for consequences. As such, for most organization, the internet and the information therein is unpredictable and difficult to control or regulate. On this issue, the respondents commented on the destructive outcomes of internet platforms, especially due to poor or improper utilization. A number of them pointed out that platforms such as Facebook were used mainly for socialization and that such networks were not appropriate for holding formal conversations about company businesses.

...The communication channels are utilized mainly as a socialization agent, especially Facebook and Twitter. For blogging it is used mainly by people who have a common topic to discuss like business support and financing and so on. (Ln2). ...Subscribers, dealers and other stakeholders utilize the internet platforms to socialize, the dialogue is interesting and maybe not very useful for suggestions and decisions but we accept the socialization aspect of the Facebook, Twitter, Linked-in, live chats and so on (Rn1).

Other respondents added that customers utilized the internet to post negative opinions and information which could be damaging to the brand image. All these views show that there is poor sensitization on the functions of social media networks. A PR manager expressed fear that with social media networks, simple mistakes damage both the company image and the effectiveness of the online platforms.

Unavailability of Specific Platforms for PR

This sub-section presents the research findings on the challenge of availability of specific platforms for PR. The following constraints were identified by the respondents: Constraints of integrating consumer relations strategies, constraints of online content management, and constraints of loyalty, and image management.

Constraints of Integrating Public Relations Strategies

Almost all the respondents pointed out that internet platforms, especially social media networks, were useful when integrated within a larger communications strategy. However, one respondent stated that customer relations could never be realized online. One participant noted that some of clients were drawn to social media platforms because they represented low-cost methods of PR engagements compared to the traditional methods. He suggested the need to balance strategies by mixing the traditional and the online methods in PR practice. Other participants had these to say:

...PR for banks is customer relations, business relations, investor relations and such, so we feel that customers need to walk in to the banks for service and at the same time engage them online. So customer relations and stakeholder relations cannot be realized online alone (Ln1). ...For PR Internet tools are very effective but can never replace face to face communication. Public Relations is about building relations and this cannot always be done on a computer screen alone, we need to combine strategies (Pn1).

Based on the above views, it was important to recognize Internet platforms for PR as being supplementary to existing strategies, not a replacement. One PR professional on noted that organizations must be ready to listen to online conversations in order to ably manage dialogues and emerging issues that were pertinent to the brand image and business operations.

Constraints of Online Content Management

Management of online communication requires technical expertise or experience. The research participants cited a dearth in technical know-how in respect to content management, specifically during online shopping, building a customer base, engagement with existing and potential clients and influencing buyers. Some of the respondents stated as follows:

...For PR, the challenges we face is content management, most of the time we have to seek expert and technical skilled workers to deal with building and maintenance of online relations. (Ln4). ...For the department loading and trying to create catchy messages that attract buyers is very challenging, because you have to be very creative with advertising online, we rely on adverts to get customers and so they have to be very of very good standards. We sometimes have to promise free items for certain purchases (En4). ...Social media

specifically twitter and Facebook is time consuming, on the users personal lives and also on our side it is more challenging to select and sift messages that are relevant across all those channels (Rn4).

Inconsistency in membership and visits to the online platforms were also cited as some of the challenges of integrating PR online. The respondents said there was lack of consistency in the accounts used by clients registered online and some did not use the existing accounts often leading to suspension. They also mentioned that organizations were inconsistent in updating the websites with current information. Indeed, based on observations, some of the organisation's online communications dated two months back from the time of the study. Another respondent also explained that it took long for customers respond to issues when internet connectivity was unreliable.

Constraints of Trust, Loyalty and Negative Organizational Image

One respondent said the LinkedIn platform was still quite new to many online users, making it least trusted by both the organizations and customers. Another respondent said he found the online platform lacking in confidentiality. He feared that accounts on LinkedIn could be hacked easily. Another challenge was also that it was difficult to distinguish serious from non-serious clients on these online platforms. Therefore, the challenge of using online platforms is that the PR practitioner can never be certain that he is reaching the right people. Moreover, every bit of information posted online could be potentially damaging to the organization. Therefore, the PR practitioner has to waste a lot of time responding to every issue raised to control publicity. The views below emphasize some of the findings:

...Building customer trust and loyalty is part of our PR function, and the challenge is trying to get people to trust you before engaging business deals (En2). ...Call centre experiences give a chance to customers and Individuals to feel free on the internet, it allows them the chance to express themselves and mostly without consequences so people can say anything that can question the organization image (Ln3). ...For PR functions like campaigns, investor relations, corporate social responsibility CSR activities the internet has been very useful because we have connected with many people, we also make announcements online and the challenge is compliance with our terms and conditions, especially if people need support from our foundations among others (Rn2).

Constraints of Narrow Audience

The respondents stated that internet communication tools were only accessible to those with internet-enabled technologies such as smart phones. Moreover, the respondents observed, since most of the online platforms were owned by different vendors and companies, it was difficult to share information across networks. Therefore, the organizations always have to create different types of audiences across different platforms. Besides, audiences in regions with weak connectivity were limited in accessing online information. As two respondents explained:

...Because subscribers choose whom to follow on these sites, products can reach a very narrow target audience, we attract very young people and yet our subscribers are mixed (Rn1). ... The main challenge is, illiteracy in usage of the

Internet platforms not all members use the internet and therefore very little information is disseminated online (Bn1).

The respondents cited an interesting phenomenon where organizations at times posted information online for a limited time because of sustainability issues. As such, only a limited number of people online could see such information within the time. The respondents further pointed out that platforms such as Live Chats had very few users and were thus unreliable in PR engagements. Therefore, organizations seeking to integrate PR on online platforms must select only the most effective means of communication. According to one respondent, social media networks have not only had an impact on organizations but on marketing itself; the era of catchy punch lines and striking images is no longer the be-all and end-all. PR engagements online is about establishing continual dialogue, building trust and interacting with the right audience in the right way, as fast as possible. As such, marketers have to be at the forefront engaging consumers and controlling the brand.

Constraints of Interactivity in the Platforms Identified for PR

This sub-section presents the research findings on the constraints of interactivity in the online platforms identified for PR. The constraints identified were: Constraints of security and privacy concerns and constraints of systems interaction management.

Security and Privacy Concerns

One of the constraints cited by the respondents from Safaricom Company included lack of privacy in the communications system. This view suggests that companies may be afraid to utilize the telecommunication services to relay PR-related information. Other two participants from the KCB Group stated as follows:

...Our customers lack of confidence in the security of online banking particularly when it comes to the use of online tools to do transaction, people feel insecure with their financial information on internet (Ln1). ...Security in the bank is a concern for both of us, Most of time we promise clients that we protect their privacy, but many believe it is not possible to be anonymous online (Ln4).

Indeed, security concerns were repeatedly cited by most of the respondents who reiterated that they interacted online with a lot of caution.

Constraints of Interaction Systems Management

The respondents said one of the challenges with PR online was that some users (both organizational employees and customers) failed to follow up on past communications. As such, there were many incidences of broken communication processes which had led to loss of mutual trust. From observation, it emerged that the Facebook pages of the organizations were mostly used by the stakeholders to make enquiries and responses were made through the PR offices. Nevertheless, it was noted that since many customers preferred Facebook, there was always a challenge of non-response to customer enquiries. Some of the PR officers admitted that they were always overwhelmed by the big data from the social networks. Some stated that they tried to interact with as many clients as possible at the same time to overcome the big data problem. However, they said the problem with dealing with too many customers at once was the likelihood of failing to address the unique needs of some. Besides, some of the platforms, by design, only supported interactions between a limited number of people.

...Interaction can be quite a challenge because of the number of people on the platforms...Tracking conversation is very involving and time wasting but we still dialogue (Rn2). ...Online shopping is very involving, so we have many people trying to answer customers and it can very confusing in the process some conversations go unanswered because of the traffic (En3).

One participant differed by citing that online interactions were defined according to the available tools and purpose of online visits, noting that audiences visited the internet to make inquiries follow advertisements and to buy goods and access services. Another participant dismissed online PR engagements altogether, suggesting that she still found face-to-face or telephone calls most effective. One of the causes of delayed feedback was highlighted by one respondent thus:

....Our social media platforms are usually used for interactions, especially on giving feedback to people asking questions. It is not very busy as such, so maybe delayed feedback (Bn2).

The plate below illustrates that the KCB Group used its Twitter handle to inform stakeholders about events sponsored or organized by the organization. Sports events, which formed part of the company corporate social responsibility (CSR) and publicity activities, were also publicized on the social platform.

Further, the study found that, for most PR practitioner, tracking of individual communication with clients was difficult, meaning most customers did not receive satisfactory responses. One respondent reported that some PR practitioners simply made responses not based on authenticated information so as to avoid further engagements online. Besides, as one respondent explained, some of the conversations on the social media networks tended to get easily side-tracked by unimportant issues:

...Interaction has to be followed so that you solve individual problems, and you can only do so when you have the right systems installed to back up the platforms. You can interact with other online users; the only challenge will be when people start to talk about non important, unrelated issues or topics (Pn3).

Causes of Constraints faced in Utilization the Internet for PR

This section describes the potential causes of the constraints faced in utilizing the internet for PR. The main causes identified were: lack of proficiency and lack of role specification in organizations, as explained below.

Lack of Proficiency on Systems Management

The respondents stated that lack of expert knowledge was a major constraint to proper implementation of PR practices online. As such, lack of knowledge was a major cause of existing problems in online PR practices across the companies studied. Nevertheless, the respondents seemed to believe that systems could be put in place to overcome all the problems of online communication. As one participant stated:

...A significant organizational commitment to Internet-based applications requires information technology workers who are skilled in new technical areas such Internet security and digital commerce (Ln4).Similar to goal setting for your

organization, internet platforms should be planned to determine your communication objectives before designing your websites, it goes a long way in management (Pn3).

Another respondent highlighted the need to keep systems simple. She explained that complex sites attracted very few visitors. Another solution given by the respondents was the use of hyperlinks to problem solving sites, which one participant said would save a lot of time. The respondents said for most of the organizations, the public had segments with some levels of illiteracy and other segments that did not see any need for technology applications for PR. According to one PR respondent, these groups need to be sensitized on the value of online PR practices. Other suggestions given to increase traffic on the online platforms included creating messages that were appealing and attractive.

Lack of Role Specification

Individuals adopt internet platforms such as the social media platforms to build relationships or connections and to interact. Therefore, organizations can leverage these sites as platforms on which to engage clients directly. It was observed that on most of the online platforms of the organizations studied, customers exchanged information, made comments and reviewed product. However, one challenge that was reported was the lack of the marketers' or PR practitioners' over the quality and flow of information. To resolve such problems, one respondent suggested the use of personalized signatures. He explained that channels such as e-mails encouraged greater responsibility and quality control on the information relayed. On lack of role specification, the respondents gave their views as follows:

Creating roles among staff dealing with online shoppers so as to avoid confusions, and also having people who know what they are doing roles can conflict because engagement online is very important to keep your customers posted, delaying may loss them (En2). ...Our staffs need to be trained generally and more strategies need to be put in place as far as online communication is concerned (Bn4). ...Listen closely to the people that matter to your business requires specific persons within the system to create, import, and share lists of social influencers and important clients. You can also quickly respond to common questions or you can have customer requests by saving pre-approved and on-brand responses for future use (Rn1).

Participants from the communications agency noted that social media advertising was fairly new, pointing out that it can be a complex process that requires effective planning, testing, and measuring. They said training of staff to deal with the online communication and having a team to manage the online communication exclusively would minimize the problems. It was noted that organizations seeking consultancy services usually asked for professionalism. Therefore, the respondents said that professional knowledge was needed to manage the media, which most companies did not have. Therefore, the study established that training would go a long way in solving many problems incurred during online communication.

Challenge faced when monitoring of the Platforms

This section discusses the results of the study on the constraints faced when monitoring the platforms. The challenges identified included lack of monitoring tools and systems and challenges of monitoring large content, as explained below.

Monitoring Tools and Systems

It is not easy to monitor the behaviour of those who go online, especially considering their large numbers. As one respondent explained, if a consumer, for example, initiated the online purchase process to buy items, and then bailed from the shopping process before completion, the company representative could not easily track the consumer down or re-market the service or product based on the knowledge of that consumer's behaviour. One respondent agreed that it was very difficult to understand and respond to the unique needs of the often too many online shoppers. Another respondent suggested that it was important to ask more questions to ascertain the unique needs of clients, but this too would require a lot of time considering the number of visitors of online platforms.

The respondents from the KCB Group added that users experienced challenges with registration on the online platforms. They said the company often required the customers to provide their names and demographic information as well as the types of products or services they may be interested in. According to the respondents, this information helps the company to provide relevant communication to clients. Another participant noted that they always viewed their online visitors, but the challenge was with too much online "traffic" at any given time which made it difficult to respond to every customer. While one organization acknowledged that it had some monitoring tools in place, most of the respondents said some of the tools comprised expensive applications and systems for their companies.

...Monitoring is same as what we have talked about in tracking conversation, whoever, I can say that organizations need to install the systems that have been evaluated and considered good (Pn3). ... We use different technology to monitor and look at information online, we use the analytics tools available on internet for free, like for Facebook and Twitter analytics tools. We use tools to look for mentions across social media networks; we have IT professionals to do the monitoring (Rn1).

One of the respondents identified 'wildfire' by Google as a tool that could help in measuring the brands that are gaining fans the fastest on Facebook, Twitter, and Google+. He said the tool could help a company to view the total number of followers and the percentage of fans gained in the past days, weeks, months or a longer duration. Other participants suggested putting in place a designated team to monitor online communication. They said such a team would conduct continuous evaluations and report on the effectiveness of online PR tasks and process, technical tools and applications.

Monitoring Large Content

Consistency was identified as the most challenging task, especially when monitoring large content from all the internet communication tools. Another challenge highlighted was that of mechanical breakdowns caused by the overwhelming number of online shoppers. The respondents said sometimes information overloads resulted in computer hung-ups or crashes. Citing other challenges, some participants spoke as follows:

...If you've built an online presence for your company, you should plan on keeping tabs on what's being said about you and your industry on the web. Failure to plan is failure to success. Online business today is a two-way conversation, and you can't participate unless you know what discussions are

going on online (Pn4). ...We talked about it earlier, although we have systems to track and monitor online communication which should be used regularly (Ln2).

Technical capabilities are said to be needed to solve the challenges of internet communication. One participant agreed that not all problems can be solved through internet; and a lot of technical capabilities therefore was needed to solve customer issues online. It was indicated that technical persons can pull in statistics from Twitter, Facebook and easily use them to monitor, engagement only if you have staff to manage that role.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Several constraints impair the utilization of Internet for PR functions in most organizations. There are constraints or challenges of security procedures and logging in processes while utilizing the internet tools. Constraints of interaction are also encountered from security and trust concerns. Moreover, there are challenges of online information management which includes content management, lack of tools of monitoring and evaluation, management of platforms for appropriate use. Some of the constraints also stem from the misuse of the platforms with messages that can cause negative image. Others come from ineffective utilization of the platforms by relaying messages that are not in line with the communication objectives. Besides, there are challenges of integrating PR and communication strategies. Last are the constraints that result from lack of expert knowledge, experience and role specification. In light of these findings, it is recommended that PR practitioners should develop internet plans to bolster interactivity and utilize social media services fully to produce effective messages to strengthen organisation-public relationships. Stakeholders should also identify the internet tools that are useful in fostering customer satisfaction.

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