

# PUBLIC RELATIONS IN NIGERIAN PUBLIC LIBRARIES: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper critically assesses public relations in public libraries in Nigeria. A simple random sampling method was used to select 751 staff and 1161 users from 14 chosen public libraries. The result shows that about 60% of staff in public libraries were unaware of the importance of public relation in the delivery of effective services to the users. On evaluation, the author suggests remedies aimed at improving public relations in public libraries.

## KEYWORDS:

## INTRODUCTION

One may argue that public relations is meant for business organization only, for public relations is a phrase or terminology that is often used in business circles, especially in connection with promotion of enterprises. It is a management function aimed at winning support for an activity, ideology, service or institution. Ochai (1995) defined it as a management function which evaluates public attitude, identify the policies and procedures of an individual or an organisation with the public interest. It can also be seen as an activity of an industry, union, corporation, profession, government or other organization in building and maintaining sound and productive relations with special public so as to adapt itself to its environment and interpret itself to society.

From these definitions, the promotion and interpretation of public institutions are emphasized. The public library has to explore ways of making its presence felt. It has to know the needs of the staff and users. Above all it has to "sell" its "wares" which include books, Journals and other resources of the library.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The misconception that librarianship is chiefly concerned with books should be erased from the minds of the public. The public should be aware that the profession is not concerned with books only but with meeting the information needs of society and that books are only one of the ways in which the society's needs for information are met, (Slater, 1981). Peasants,

Government officials, professionals, unemployed, visually handicapped, children, illiterate and other

users of public libraries all need information in order to play their respective roles in the society and to lead a meaningful life. Usherwood (1989), stated that public libraries in the Urban areas must use public relation as one of the tools to meet their objectives of providing information to rural dwellers such as the fishermen, traders, farmers etc. and by so doing, development would take place in these neglected areas. Development has not fully taken place in rural areas and rural dwellers are not experiencing any improved living conditions because libraries usually operate from privileged positions in urban centres without any input to the intended beneficiary, Ochai (1995). The assumption is that the rural populace needs libraries to fight illiteracy among other things and therefore we should extend services to them using models employed in more advanced countries; models such as branch libraries, mobile libraries etc. in Nigeria, most of the information meant for public consumption is disseminated through newspapers, televisions or radios which for various reasons are out of reach of the rural folks. Most state or national newspapers published in English do not reach the rural districts. Public libraries can contribute towards the alleviation of this problem if an effective public relation is considered (Rice, 1992).

If Nigerian public libraries are to have any meaning to the tax payers, our pre-occupation must be to develop a strategy of relating well with both the rural and the urban dwellers. The emphasis would be to create a completely new breed of librarians with a strong sense of purpose

who will see services as a challenge both in the urban and rural areas. The new breed librarians could be seen as librarians who are ready to render services both in the rural areas and urban areas if the facilities for doing so are available. The public libraries should try to sell its "wares" i.e. books, journals and non-book media by taking a cue from the business world and learning to assume the role of the salesman who goes out to the streets to demonstrate to potential customers the quality and usefulness of the products. This cannot be achieved if an effective public relation system is not initiated.

King et. al. (1980) noted that a significant number of public library users lack understanding of the public library and that it is through public relation that we can maintain and develop a mutual understanding between the library and the various segments of the public. The public library as an information resource centre should motivate the public to articulate their problems and help to connect them with source of information or refer them to other sources that would be equally useful in providing the information needed. According to Navalani (1990), if no effort are made by public libraries to relate well with the public and if nothing is done to show the public that the library is indispensable to their information needs, the public library will not be better than a bookstore or the reading room and the public librarian would be regarded as mere custodians of library materials. The interest of the public should be considered by Public Libraries by adopting good strategies such as public relation promotions. In addition, with public relations, librarians should seek to influence and build confidence for library services in the minds of the tax payers. The public is likely to support and use a service in which they have confidence. This assertion is in the position of Kantumoya (1993), which states that people visit the medical doctor or the lawyer because they believe in their ability to find solutions to their problems. Similarly, with public relations, it should be possible to create a more positive understanding of the professional values and the varieties of services offered by libraries. Lesley (1971) in his public relation handbook noted that public relation enables institutions and people to learn what others think of them, determine what they must do to earn the goodwill of others, devise ways to win the goodwill and carry on programmes designed to secure goodwill. Hence, public libraries must develop good public relation to help them combat the negative image they had acquired during the past. Wilson (1992), stated that by the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century it was becoming

apparent that many public libraries needed to create a favourable image to affect the users growing distrust. Public relation practitioners must, however, use a systematic approach to developing their campaigns. One of such approaches developed by Bernays is called the "engineering of consent" and consist of goals or objectives of the institution. In this case, once the goals and objectives of public libraries is set out such as "to serve the community and the information centre and others", efforts should be geared towards meeting these through adequate human and material resources.

## METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire was designed and sent to respondents in fourteen (14) state libraries in Nigeria. The questionnaire which was entitled "Public Relation Assessment Questionnaire" (P.R.A.Q) was personally administered in some libraries while others were mailed to the librarians of the selected library for onward distribution to the respondents and collected through the same channel after two reminders. The two-page questionnaire consisted of options for respondents to express themselves. Out of 751 copies of the questionnaire administered on the staff of mostly the readers' services and reference division, 580 were fully completed and returned representing 77.2% response rate. For the users' survey, 881 out of 1161 (75.8%) were completed and returned. Users in the children's sections were not considered in the study because children lacks the ability or skill to handle public relation task.

### Research Questions

- (a) What are the expectations of users in Lending and Reference Units of the Library?
- (b) What are the available channels of communication for the public library / user interface?
- (c) What is the correlation of qualification and service effectiveness?

On the qualification of the respondents who are predominantly staff working in the readers services and reference divisions, 201 (35%) had First School Leaving Certificate, closely followed by 191 (33%) of the respondents with GCE/SSCE/NECO/Grade 11 Certificates, 101 (18%) respondents had OND or NCE. The Professionals are in the above category. The first-degree respondents were 68 (12%) and the Master degree holders were 13 (12%). It must be stated here that staff in readers' services and

## DATA ANALYSIS

Table 1: Qualification of staff deployed to Readers Service / Reference Divisions

S/No	Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
1	Primary School Certificate	201	35
2	GCE/SSCE/NECO/Grade II	191	33
3	OND/NCE	107	18
4	BA, B Sc, B LS, or any Master degree	68	12
5	MA, M.Sc, MLS or any Master degree	13	2
	<b>Total</b>	<b>580</b>	<b>100</b>

reference division were chosen as respondents because they are the personnel that interact with users frequently. Though staff with primary school and secondary school certificates were respondents with 60% of the entire staff in the Readers services / Reference Divisions, their inputs were not considered because they do not possess appropriate certification in librarianship most especially as public relation is a professional duty and requires competent hands.

Table 2: Medium of relating with the public

	Medium	Frequency	Percentage
a.	Radio	206	35
b.	Television	162	27
c.	Newspapers	134	23
d.	Posters on Shelves	492	77
e.	Book Jackets	449	77
f.	Exhibition	211	36
g.	Orientation	117	20

On the medium of relating with the public, 206 (35%) respondents used radio, 162 (27%) made use of Television, Newspapers had 134 (23%) respondents. 492 (84%) respondents said that posters on shelves were their sources of relating with the public. Book-jackets, Exhibitions had 449 (77%) and 211 (36%) respectively. Orientation was the least medium with 117 (20%).

It could be stated here that the mass media having the least patronage as a medium of relating with the public may not be unconnected with its financial implications. Similarly, patronage on posters or shelves, Book-Jackets and Exhibition is high because the financial implication may not be as much when compared to the mass media.

Table 3: Visits to rural areas

Answers	Respondents	Percentage
Yes	5	36
No	9	64
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>100</b>

The Heads of the 14 selected libraries were asked to indicate whether they have been visiting the rural areas, 5 (36%) of the Librarians said they visited the rural areas while 9 (64%) said they did not visit the rural areas. Lack of mobile library van and public relation officers in public libraries in the urban areas could be one of the reasons why nine public libraries out of fourteen are unable to regularly pay visit to the rural areas.

It is evident from table 5 that 96 (11%) of users perceived librarians in readers service / reference sections of the library as friendly. 399 (12%) said they were not ready to answer

Table 4: Users' perception of Staff in the Readers' Services / Reference Sections of the Libraries

	Perception	Respondents	Percentage
1.	Friendly to Users	96	11
2.	Unfriendly to Users	399	45
3.	Not ready to answer questions	102	12
4.	They are helpful	284	32
	Total	881	100

Table 5: Problems encountered by users while obtaining information

S/No	Problems	Respondents	Percentage
1.	Incompetent staff providing the needed information	333	38
2.	Library system is difficult to understand	401	45
3.	Lack of proper direction in the Library	96	11
4.	Much time spent in locating needed information	51	6
	TOTAL	881	100

questions. Two hundred and eighty-four (32%) agreed that they were helpful.

This unfriendly disposition to users is as a result of the fact that they are unmindful of the efficacy of public relation in effective service delivery. The qualification of staff deployed to readers services may also contribute to this unfriendly attitude. The study reveals that 68% of staff with primary school and secondary school certificates are in this section which is the contact point of a library.

Table 5 shows that the complex nature such as the different divisions of the library system, due to subject departmentalisation, is one of the major problems encountered by users in efforts to obtain information. This is indicated by 45% of users surveyed. Three hundred and Thirty-three (38%) of the respondents said incompetent staff was their problem, while lack of proper direction in the Library was the problem of 96 (11%) of the respondents.

## CONCLUSION

From the findings and analyses of this study, it can be deduced that the staff in the reader services division are those whose qualifications are below required professional qualifications (Table 1). This factor needs to be redressed. 68% of the reader services staff also

have no paraprofessional qualification. It should be noted that the reader services and the reference division departments are the contact point of the public library. Staff in this sensitive area of the library are expected to possess professional qualifications such as Diploma in Library Science or Bachelor in Library Science. It is also noted that public libraries use posters on shelves and book jackets displayed at strategic point in the library as the major medium of communicating with the public. The impression one gets in coming into a library lasts long. The layout and plan of the library must be clearly displayed just immediately after entering the library. Porters' desk that check in and check out users should be clearly labelled. This could be accomplished by useful direction signs. To eliminate confusion, types of catalogues – Author / title, subject must be clearly marked out for easy understanding.

The study also reveals that regular visit to the rural area which is an integral part of the public relation programme is not vigorously pursued in some libraries (Table 4). This irregular visit or lack of it may deprive the rural dwellers of vital information in aspects of their vocation.

The public equally complains of the unfriendly attitude of the staff in the readers' services and reference divisions of the libraries even though users rated resources stored in the

libraries as adequate. This attitude may be the result of low qualification of personnel providing services at the readers' services / reference divisions. The unfriendly nature of the staff could lead to non-utilization of the library frequently by the public. In conclusion public relation must be given the deserved attention by both the Librarians and other personnel in the libraries.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Public libraries exist to stimulate intellectual usage by readers. This could be achieved by increasing public awareness on the purpose and function of libraries through enhancing an informed citizenry. Staff in reading areas of the library should be intelligent people who are appropriately qualified to serve all categories of users, whether aggressive or polite, and win them over for regular consultation of documents in the librarians' charge.

Staff posted or deployed to the readers services or the reference divisions should be friendly to the public and be ready to assist and answer questions accordingly. A professional with first degree qualification is strongly recommended to control this section of the Library.

Handbook on detailed guidance in the use of the library should be given to the users preferably compiled by Association of State Directors of Library Services. The orientation programme, which is currently a routine in academic libraries, must be vigorously embraced in public libraries. The handbook and orientation programme would make the library system easier for users to understand. The orientation could be organized at least twice a year. The urban based public librarians should be visiting the rural areas through mobile library frequently so that the "peoples' university" would impact positively on the lives of rural dwellers. Finally, it behoves every staff in the public library; whether messenger, a cleaner, a porter, a clerk to see himself or herself as a public relation officer and should be aware of the goals and objectives of public library.

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