

THE NEED FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS EFFORTS IN ENHANCING THE PERFORMANCE OF ACADEMIC LIBRARIES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The academic or university libraries are concerned with the collection, processing, storage and dissemination of recorded information for the purpose of reading, study and consultation. In order for these libraries to attain these goals, many activities are performed in the libraries which translate to library and information services. The employment of public relations efforts in libraries would help create, package, market and retrieve information for libraries, their users and their services effectively.

Introduction

The library is regarded as the heart of the intellectual system of a university. To a large extent, the quality of a university is measured by the services provided by the library because of its unique position in the overall university system. The main purpose of a university library is to support the university's objectives, which are in the areas of learning, teaching, research and service.

The academic library provides varied and in-depth information resource that enables individuals pursue the specific field of study in which they wish to specialize. Both schools and tertiary institutions libraries are known to be indispensable part of the overall curriculum. A variety of information resources such as textbooks, journals, reference books, literary works, multi media materials, etc., are selected, systematically organised and disseminated to both teachers and pupils, lecturers and students with the sole aim of supporting and enriching the curriculum.

The educational sector is one of the nation's greatest assets, with an increasing demand for broad based educational institutions all over the country, states have also established educational institutions that would help cope with these demands and would be technologically oriented. It has become necessary for academic libraries to adopt public relations strategies that would help them cope with these demands and at the same time meet their objectives effectively.

With the public concern for quality teaching, quality research and high standards in education, academic libraries have found themselves competing for limited facilities, competing for good quality staff and searching for alternative sources of funds and other strategies to deliver information to their patrons and to meet their ever growing demands for quality service.

For academic libraries to be able to meet their patron's demands they need to employ strategies to help them carry out their objectives of quality services within the shortest possible time. In doing so, just like in modern organisations, they need to adopt client- service approach and reach-out with good image to their patrons. Academic libraries need to understand and relate properly with these complex publics, they have to watch out to ensure that walls of communication are well established, sustained and maintained; they need to also understand that they can only do these if they are properly armed with viable public relations strategies.

There is need for better performances in Bcnue State University library as an academic library and all these can only come through better understanding and mutual respect between libraries and their publics, effective dialogue and steady two-way flow of communication between libraries and their users. This is where public relations come in.

How Public Relations Efforts Would Help Market Library Products

Public relations efforts would help academic libraries market themselves and their products (library services) effectively. According to Ajala (1993, P. 10), "Public relations is the totality of an organisation or individuals performance aimed at earning public favorability which results in continued growth mutually beneficial to the organisation or individuals and society within which it operates".

Ajala's definition is aimed at making us understand that in public relations, favorability has to be worked at in order to be achieved. It is something that is not just given but has to be earned, be it by an organisation or an individual including academic libraries. This also means that public relations can be employed by academic libraries if they wish to portray a more positive image for themselves through the services they render to their patrons.

The British Institutes of Public Relations defines public relations as: "A deliberate planned sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics" as cited in Jefkins, 1985: 203)

The public relations process should be sustained. That is, it should be kept going and maintained. It is a vital part of an organisation and should be kept active at all times. Mutual understanding means understanding other people and being understood by them, which is not just

informing other people, but being informed by them about their wishes and attitudes. Academic libraries carefully select materials that enter for their patron's needs, when they employ these public relations strategies lines of communication would be opened continually and users' needs would be met and these libraries would create awareness to other services rendered by them.

Public relations efforts in academic libraries would secure understanding and good will, between academic libraries and their publics (library patrons). Greta Renborg (1984:234) says, "Before the objectives of a library's public relations can be defined, it is necessary to define the objectives of the very library for which the public relations work shall be accomplished".

This process can be illustrated as objectives of academic library- objectives of library public relations.

The objectives of academic libraries include:

- i) To provide information materials required for the academic programmes of the parent institution
- ii) To provide research information resources to the needs of faculty and research students.
- iii) To provide information resources for recreation and for personal self development of users,
- iv) To provide study accommodation in a useful variety of locations.
- v) To cooperate with other libraries at appropriate levels for improved information services,
- vi) To provide specialised information service to appropriate segments of the wider community.

Edoka (2000:14) in emphasizing the role of academic libraries in any parent institution says, "The prime obligation of an academic library is to provide appropriate information resources for study and research to members of its own institutions".

The process illustrated above has made it compulsory for library public relations objectives to be enumerated. These objectives can be grouped into four major aims.

- i) To establish and maintain mutual understanding between a library and its publics.
- ii) To influence favourably public and governmental attitudes and opinions regarding libraries.
- iii) To increase the general awareness of services provided by libraries.
- iv) To build confidence in the services provided by libraries.

In elaborating the importance of one of the library's public relations objective of increasing general awareness of services provided by libraries, the importance of information can be passed across to library patrons, especially those who do not know what services the library renders. Through public relations efforts the benefits to be gained by the target audience or patrons on information would be passed to them. Such benefits on information include.

- Investment in information assists in new product development, which could be the introduction of a new information technology.
 - Information is the basis of innovation.
- Effective information management enables an organisation to anticipate trends in external environment.
- An organisation's internal efficiency depends on effective control and integration of existing information.
 - Information is a pre-requisite of intelligent market positioning.
 - Effective information management improves communication within organisations.
 - Information helps people work more effectively.
- « Effective management of information can save money and eliminate duplication of efforts.
- Access to information enables individuals to function more effectively in society.

Information is a key resource for an organisation. An ever-increasing proportion of economically active population is engaged in information related occupations. As such, academic Libraries cannot do without information. Academic Libraries are created to generate, store, retrieve, integrate, package, market, communicate and distribute information.

Public relations can support a library by helping it market its products, through its market-support function. Public relations can be used to achieve a number of objectives. The most important of these are to raise awareness, to inform and educate, to gain understanding, to build trust, to make friends, to give people reasons to buy and finally to create a climate of consumer acceptance.

Ways Public Relations Help Create Awareness in Academic Libraries

In achieving a number of library objectives, public relations help create awareness in

academic libraries through the following ways:

Current Awareness Service

This emerged with the need to keep up to date with progress within a field. Current awareness service keeps the information user up to date, saves project time, aids in the creation of new ideas, saves time and money spent on journals, reduce the paper flows through an organization. Through public relations efforts, professional members and students will be well informed on the current happenings in their profession, demands for new skills, new innovations, practices, potentials of new and old technologies, utilization of current and emerging technologies would be communicated to them immediately. Most patrons are not aware that academic libraries render this type of service, through public relations, publicity would be made on these types of library services.

Community Analysis

This refers to the overall process of identifying the mission, objectives and activities of professional bodies. Tufan (2004:3) added the need to know the professional bodies, plans, demographic analysis and focus groups. Through its community relations strategy, public relation helps libraries in identifying the ever increasing information needs of library users and thus, the information searching behaviour of the professionals, users. While the library is busy with trying to meet with these needs, the public relations unit of libraries are busy computing research on how these needs would be met with the needed materials. Libraries would achieve their number one objective of providing the right information, to the right users at the right time and in the shortest possible time.

Cultural Role

A library's greatest contribution lies in the diffusion of concepts that promote new cultural rebirth which depends upon the three main objectives of the library.

First the library should stock materials to decolonize the minds of the people, encouraging the Nigerian readers to appreciate their cultural heritage and giving them current perspectives about themselves, their abilities and achievements.

Second the materials acquired by the library should assist the newly independent countries in understanding and controlling their environment.

Third, the library should inculcate in the people the desired new cultural pattern by making available to them materials, print and non-print with appropriate backgrounds.

The marketing function of public relations would help the library in promoting its cultural role by creating awareness to publics and helping academic libraries with organizing cultural exhibitions, users will have better appreciation of the diversified cultural heritage of their people and at the same time create a working environment, where ideas would be exchanged, cordial relationships established and the cultural heritage of past generations would be preserved for generations to come.

Public relations also help academic libraries in achieving their objectives by creating awareness on inter-library loan services.

No library however large or comprehensive can possess all the resources it may need to satisfy the needs of its users, this has led to the local, national and international library-lending scheme or networks. Through these, researchers are able to obtain the materials they need that are not locally available, Effective inter-library cooperation is essential since often research materials are out of print, or difficult to acquire, even when the materials are commercially available, they might be too expensive and the library budget maybe too meager to warrant their purchase.

While the idea of resource sharing is accepted, inter-library loan itself is expensive; especially for the larger libraries that bear the brunt of expenses in the inter-lending operations, their libraries are at times understaffed and poorly financed and are not compensated in any way for interlibrary transactions.

Public relations acts as intermediaries between libraries and the other libraries that hope to go into operation, it makes all the initial negotiations, helps build a library collection and notifies the academic library users through inter-library loan services.

Conclusion

In helping academic libraries meet their objectives and creating awareness for library services, public relations combine conventional and non conventional tools of personal contacts, bulletins, publicity, films, enlightenment campaigns, consultation and persuasion in interacting with the populace.

In this age of electronic information services, the status and reputation of library and information services depend, not only on their adoption of hardware and software, but on the quality of their livewire.

A major challenge for the profession of librarianship is keeping libraries in touch with the community. Libraries should employ public relations strategies to help create, establish and sustain **information** between them and their publics.

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