

Emerging Functions of Secretaries as Public Relation Officers of Organizations

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Abstract: *There is a widely held belief that secretaries are Public Relations Officers of their organization through their daily contacts with both the internal and external members of their organizations. Most secretaries are not Public Relations experts but by virtue of the nature their jobs, they assist in promoting the image of the organizations, therefore making them relevant in the management communication process. The study employs Social Relations and Behavioural theory as theoretical framework upon which the study rests. Social relations theory argues that people's reaction to mass media messages and their action on the messages are based on their interaction with friends and social groups. Behavioural theory on the other hand posits that changes in behaviour of members of society are the result of individual's response to events (stimuli that occurred in the environment).*

Secretaries as public relations officers of an organization are expected to communicate with members of the public using well refined communication strategies, and it is the success or otherwise of these strategies that will form the basis of their perception about the organization. Good public image attracts customers, while negative image repels, therefore, it is necessary for organization to manage their image in the minds of the public so as to guard against loss of customers which may result into loss of business opportunities for the organization. It is recommended from the study that management should recognize the crucial roles played by secretaries in their performance of public relations function and as such incorporate them into the public relations planning team. Secretaries should also be given on the job training in computer operation and other communication skills so as to improve their performance on the job.

Keywords: *Secretaries, public relations officer, organization, Issues & themes.*

1. BACKGROUND

The secretary of an organization is very key in the image making of an organization because he/she is the one that has first contact with visitors to the organization before allowing the visitor have access to who he/she is looking for. By implication, the secretary is a public relations representative of the company, although, his major responsibility is managing his boss and the office, needless to say that secretaries come in contact with members of the public who have come to see his/her boss. Therefore, the secretary becomes a symbol of the company's prosperity and corporate image.

Newsman (2003), remarks that public perception of an organization comes through the manner of reception accorded by the secretary when the company is visited. The secretary apart from dealing with visitors also deals with members of staff who are the internal publics. It is important to note that for the public to have a good image of an organization, the secretary must perform his/her duties in managing communication process with people he/she has contact with, without stress. Since secretaries cannot operate in a vacuum, Center et al (2005) advise the secretaries to understand the essence of good relationships in an organization because one will discover that at least half of the business life is taken up with people, and the more skilled one is at it, the more effective the person will be, and the more profitable the organization will be.

A secretary who frowns at visitors may not know when he/she will misbehave to a businessman who has brought in a million-naira contract to the organization. Such a secretary will be working at cross purposes with the aims and objectives of establishing a company, with his/her negative approach to customers. This may arise if the secretary lacks public relations skills, which could mean attending

politely and promptly to customer's complaints, requests and observations as well as making the office tidy. Public Relation skills of secretaries attract customers to an organization.

Every organization is made up of people in whom the ultimate of any organization is the achievements of its set goals. These set goals can only be achieved through effective communication and good public relations skills. Every member of any organization deserves respect, cooperation and understanding, that is why Sociologists assert that man likes to exist in association with fellow men due to the inherent advantages therein. This underscores the importance of mutual understanding between an organization and its publics. The manner and approach in which members of the organization communicate affects the success or failure of the organization's internal and external publics. Good communication is vital to good leadership, effective management and good communication cannot be efficient where organization is not well structured.

Seital (2006) posits that communication is perhaps the most fundamental requisite for public relations. The task of maintaining the good image of an organization is a responsibility of all members of staff, though this is a management function which Public Relations department has to oversee and secretaries who are the first contact person in an organization has a major role to play in projecting the image of the organization.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is anchored on two theories, which are Social Relations Theory, and Behavioural Theory.

2.1. Social Relations Theory

Melvin De Fleur propounded this theory in 1970 and the assumptions of the theory are that:

1. Members of the mass media belonging to the same social category interact or relate with each other.
2. The interactions and relationship among members of the same social categories determine the effects of mass media messages on them.

The theory states that people's reaction to mass media and their actions upon them are modified by their informed social relationships with friends and social groups etc.

The relationship between this theory and the study is that it sees individual as members of the same social category that interact in an organization working towards achieving a set goal, since it is the role of public relations to maintain goodwill. Mutual understanding and relationship. It is pertinent to state that this theory enunciates how public relations help to ensure a good relationship through communication that will therefore help to build a good image.

2.2. Behavioural Theory

This theory was propounded by Ivan Pavlov and B.F. Skinner in 1957.

The assumptions of the theory are that:

1. Changes in behaviour are the result of an individual's response to events (stimuli) that occur in the environment.
2. The internal states could influence behaviour as external stimuli
3. We develop responses to certain stimuli that are not naturally occurring.
4. Changes in behaviours are the results of an individual's response to events (stimuli) that occurs in the environment.
5. People mould their behaviour after that of the dramatis personae.

In relation to this study, it could be seen that behaviour could be positive or negative and behaviour could mean image. This theory helps to explain how public relations activities of secretaries help to build organizational behaviour that would later grow into a positive image for the organization. Good communication helps to build cordial relationship, which will assist in the growth of the organizational image.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper will review relevant literatures on public relations as it affects the secretaries in an organization.

According to Tye (2002) public relations is the management of communication between an organization and its publics. It involves the management of problems or issues as it helps management to be informed and responsive to public opinion as well as helps management define and emphasize its responsibility to serve public interest. Public relations is the practice of managing the spread of information between an individual or an organization (such as a business, government agencies or a non-profit making organization) and the public. Secretaries are integral part of an organization and their functions help in achieving the organizational goal.

All organizations have several basic things in common but the most obvious element is goal or purpose that may vary. Without goals, organizations have no reason to exist, and there will be no yardstick for appraisal to determine whether the organization is making progress or not. According to Daily (2011) in order to set goals, organizations must develop information from internal and external forces. Internal forces include the condition of human resources and of the manufacturing process and external forces include customer's attitudes. Availability of raw materials, and status of governmental regulations and behaviours of competitors. Daily op.sit adds that goal information involves communication and the people who set the goals depend on each other for the free exchange of ideas and information. Thus, there must be information flow both within and outside the organization and every member of an organization must be carried along through communication process before goals are set.

It is a good public relations practice if members of staff are involved in setting the organizational goals which succinctly emphasizes the importance of public relations in business. He further remarks that an organization that succeeds without public relations is like a salesman, a politician, a lawyer or any other professional persuader succeeding without a personality. The deduction here is that public relations moulds the image of an organization, as organizations could be perceived to have a personality of its own that if likes to be understood, likes to be well regarded and influential as a corporate entity.

Also, secretaries are regarded as a major marketing force for the organization and as such, they communicate on daily basis with both external and the internal publics of the organization. As part of their daily routine job, secretaries take phone calls, receive dictation and transcribe them into business correspondence, as well as liaising Officer with colleagues, various levels of staff, clients, and many other business contacts. Many secretaries attract condemnations from their bosses and colleagues if their human relations is poor.

Effective communication is a major plus for secretary staff (both oral and written). Thus, a secretary who cannot communicate well will find it difficult to establish a harmonious working relationship with the boss and other publics of the organization. A sound management and happy atmosphere are all part of good public relations, and that some of the most important public relations representatives of the organisation are the secretaries who are in constant communication with other people in and outside the firm.

3.1. Secretary's Relationship with the Internal Public

Newsom (2004) advises secretaries' never to involve themselves in argument with bosses or any member of staff and that they should learn to listen attentively and make few non-committal remarks. He recommends tact and discretion as being vital in secretaryship.

The secretary's responsibilities as a Liaison Officer' for his boss makes him to have encounters with other people in the organization.

Public relations activities of secretaries start with relationship with the boss. The secretary/boss relationship involves an understanding of each other and cooperation. An important responsibility of the secretary is to help his employer and company to build and maintain a prestigious public image that is why Daily (2011), remarks that secretaries by their behaviours should reflect the prestige of the executive and of the organization.

Various authors including Daily (2011) have expressed different opinions about the friendly relationship subsisting between the executive and the secretary but all agree that social aspects should be kept separate from the business aspect if efficiency and respect are to be maintained in the office.

The secretary must relate to other members of the organization, this association enables him to determine the nature and meaning of his environment and his position in it. Seital (2006) notes that

when secretary interact with others, he is able to notify them on how to tackle problems that come up in the process of human interactions. Secretaries must understand that it is quite rare for executives and co-workers to be in agreement always, they must adjust to individual differences to keep peace in the office and allow free flow of work.

Relationship with junior members of staff is very important in secretarial job as he is faced with the challenges of giving instructions to them. Poorly communicated instruction is likely to breed acrimony in an organization (Kerka, 2012). From the foregoing, it is therefore, very important for secretaries to have a good public relations skills in order to promote a peaceful working atmosphere in the organization.

3.2. Relationship with the External Public

Various communication scholars have recognized the role of the secretary in the progress of modern business organization. Their role in promoting good image for an organization cannot be overemphasized that is why Kerka (2012) says that secretaries can be regarded as the company, because they meet with the publics who will judge their customers by their behaviours even when the secretaries are not conscious that they are being observed. Each time the secretary makes a statement for his employer, he is not only representing him but his company as well.

Newsom (2004) remarks that if the image of the company is good, then the secretary's involvement in public relations performance is cherished by employers because he develops goodwill and influences the attitudes of customers, salesman, executives, prospective employees and others stake holders involved in the business. Dressing is part of public relations skill because attractive appearance is believed to be an asset for the organization and it tells a lot about a person, reflects one's personal image as well as the prestige of the organization one represents. According Newsom (2004), Secretary's appearance can attract or fail to attract, and in some instances, repel prospective customers to a company. This explains why some organizations especially the banking sector employ attractive ladies as marketers, secretaries and cashiers/accountants because they believe that their attractive personalities will encourage prospective customers to do business with them.

There is no gain saying that no visitor or prospective customer would want to deal with a secretary who is shabbily dressed or having a rude personality, with poor command of written and oral expression of English language. (Daily op.cit)

In similar perspective, Golberg (2001) opines that secretaries must be able to placate the angry man, and indulge the difficult customer in a way that will enhance the company's image and increase its esteem in the eyes of the publics. This is good public relations that will give the visitor a favourable impression of the company.

Often times, there are complaints that some secretaries accord their visitors cold reception. Such secretaries might have under estimated the importance of their visitors and this is not in line with the ethics of the secretarial profession (Tye, 2002). It is pertinent that a secretary must be conscious of labeling a caller "unimportant" because of casual appearance, as he may be a wealthy prospective client that may add value to the company's profitability.

In some cases, a caller without appointment and the treatment meted to them will either give a company a positive or negative image. Secretaries need to be diplomatic in handling a customer who has no previous appointment with the boss especially if the boss is reluctant to see him. Tench (2006) advises secretaries to be firm, polite and courteous.

3.3. Speaking

Tench (2006) lists the following skills as important of efficient secretarial duties:

Speaking is an indispensable skill for optimal performance of a good secretary. The secretary must be able to speak in a clear, audible, pleasant voice which carries conviction; with good speech habits to inspire people to accept willingly and trustingly, what he says to them. In a similar direction, a secretary may have good typing and shorthand skills, but may be very inadequate in meeting the publics because of difficulty in choosing words and using correct grammar thus emphasizing the importance of good speaking skills for effective secretarial duties. A good public relations officer whom the secretary represent must be able to express himself fluently. If the secretary's style annoys, distracts or confuses, the listener will not clearly hear what he has to say.

Lending credence to the importance of good speaking skills, Bliven (2001) opines that mistakes in grammar, mispronunciation or a limited vocabulary with which secretaries' express ideas and feelings distract the listeners' attention and reveal weaknesses in the secretary's education and professional ability. By extension, a secretary's inadequate speaking skill will have a gross effect on his public relations performance, which will rob negatively on the image of the organization.

3.4. Listening

Center (2005) lends credence to Tench (2006) where he notes that listening involves a speaker and a listener who exchange feedback with each other to determine the success of their speaking and listening communication.

Feedbacks get you actively involved with the speaker and his ideas. Without which, it is easier to become a passive listener where you may not know whether you understood the message or not. This may lead to breakdown in communication, which can have adverse effect on organizational efficiency and public image. Thus, secretaries must have good listening habit as it encourages persons to share feelings and ideas, and thus, results in a good foundation upon business relationship is built.

Listening is very important in all communication process, therefore it plays an important role that a formidable public relations skill require of a good secretary. In similar direction Tye (2002) recognizes the importance of listening as the physical and psychological process of receiving informational inputs from others, in which prejudicing the content of the message is regarded as a bad listening habit. People can inhibit active listening by deciding in advance what they do not like or not interested in, or do not agree with whatever the subject is going to be discussed.

3.5. Persuasion

The impact of persuasive communication on the secretary's administrative duties cannot be over emphasized. In the course of his public relations duties, he can, for instance persuade an aggrieved customer to remain with the company and plead that their services is one of the best in the industry, and they are open for suggestions which could lead to approved services.

For a secretary to be able to use persuasive communication to achieve his aims and perceptive, he must be able to select appropriate linguistic devices and styles for message representation and easy decoding, therefore secretaries as persuaders must learn to formulate messages in a way that will induce cooperation from others.

3.6. Perception

On daily basis, people form impressions about others, we give opinions, access and pass judgment on a whole range of people. Psychologists refer to the forming of impression on people as person's perception.

Center (2005) in agreement with Tench (2006) remarks that our perceptions are influenced by our own internal state; by our motivation, our past learning and all unique elements that make up our personality. They distinguish between what they refer to as "halo effect" and "stereotyping effects". According to them halo effect Involves perceiving people in terms of the concepts of good and bad ascribing all good qualities to one of who is labelled good, and all bad qualities to one who is labelled bad.

The stereotyping effect, they continue, signifies our inclination to attribute to people's traits or qualities that we associate with some reference groups in which we place them. This implies that stereotyping can cause one's perception of another to be biased if it displeases the perceiver to ignore information concerning the individual and rely instead upon the already formed stereotyped image.

Consequently, upon the unreliability of stereotyping, it is improper for a secretary who wishes to perform well in public relations functions to reply unwittingly on stereotypes. Psychologists' advice secretaries to be patient before they form opinion of their colleagues as this could affect productivity especially if the opinion is wrong.

4. CONCLUSION

From the study, it is implied that the role of secretaries as public relations officers in an organization cannot be over emphasized noting the major role they play in an organizational efficiency. The

secretary's relationship with the internal and external publics of an organization requires good public relations skills which they need to acquaint themselves with if they will be relevant in meeting the corporate goal of the organization.

Most organisations believe in employing professional secretaries not only for good image but also for efficient delivery of services to all their publics. Experienced secretaries are computer literate and this makes their work easier in this era of ICT permeating all aspect of corporate operations. A professional secretary learns public relations skills for optimal performance, which accounts for reasons why secretaries are regarded as image-makers for their organisations.

Competition in the corporate world has made it imperative for business owners to employ experienced secretaries to give good services and image for their organizations. Needless to say that, experienced secretaries remain a good asset to their organizations, newly recruited ones should be given on-the job training, which must include basic public relations skills so as to meet up with the communications challenges of a dynamic organization who wants to remain relevant in the corporate world.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no gain saying that secretaries represent their organizational image. For effective representation, secretaries must have good public relations skills, entrenched in good communication skills. These skills are learnt through workshops, seminars and relevant educational advancement for secretarial staff. Employers of labour who understand the importance of secretaries in their image making should be ready to invest in their staff training, encouraging them to join relevant professional association, give them good welfare package that will make them happy to interact positively with both the internal and external publics of the organization.

Management can receive feedback from the public from the way they are treated by putting suggestion box in the company where visitors can freely express their opinions on customer care, telephone numbers can be displayed in a conspicuous place within the company where complaints can be registered. This will keep the staff alive to their duties and secretaries as well, will know that they need to be good representatives of their boss and by extension of their organizations.

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