

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES OF PORT HARCOURT AND BENIN ELECTRICITY DISTRIBUTION COMPANIES IN ADDRESSING CUSTOMERS' COMPLAINTS

DR. ERIC GBENEKA GODAM

International Institute of Journalism, (IJ) Port Harcourt Campus.
Email- eric.godam@gmail.com
Phone numbers- 07033600754, 08055625937 (WhatsApp)

DR. SAMUEL KPENU

Head, Directorate of Information, Publications and Public Relations (IPPR)
University of Port Harcourt.
Email: Sammy.kpenu@uniport.edu.ng Phone number- 08032612889

OKON, NODINIM FLORENCE

International Institute of Journalism, (IJ) Port Harcourt Campus.
Email- onodifon3@gmail.com Phone number- 08033393152.

ABSTRACT

Electricity distribution in Nigeria began in 1898 at Marina-Lagos. Some stakeholders believe the over 120 years' operation is characterized by customer complaints. The Government attempted a rescue on the 3rd of November, 2013, by unbundling the sector and licensed the Port Harcourt and Benin Electricity Distribution Companies and nine others to enhance distribution, address customer complaints, and encourage competition among others. Nine years later, some customers believe no significant change had taken place. This study therefore comparatively analysed how the public relations strategies used by these companies have addressed complaints by their customers. The objectives of the study were: to analyse comparatively the extent to which the public relations strategies adopted by both companies conformed to public relations practice; to appraise the commitment of both establishments to the implementation of their public relations strategies, among others. The research design was survey. Theoretical frameworks were the Stakeholder and Excellence theories. The instruments used were the questionnaire and interview schedules. The sample size was 384 and data were collected using the multi-stage sampling technique. The study found out that the public relations strategies adopted by both companies conformed to public relations practice. Following these findings, it was recommended that both companies should step up their public enlightenment campaigns to enhance awareness of their programmes among their publics; and that management of both companies should show commitment by implementing agreements reached with stakeholders among others.

KEY WORDS: Electricity, Distribution Companies, Public Relations, Strategies, Stakeholders.

Introduction

Public relations strategies are usually plans, ideas, blueprints, or concepts designed to combat certain challenges encountered or foreseen by organisations in the course of dealing with their publics or to promote a course of action in line with corporate policy aimed at achieving set goals on a long or short term basis (Gregory, 2000). In Nigeria today, public relations practice have come of age nonetheless, some observers have expressed doubts over the integrity and relevance of public relations practitioners in some organisations especially in the electricity distribution sector. It is apparently difficult to admit that the electricity distribution sector, one of the country's premier public utility service providers which began at Marina, in present day Lagos State in the year 1898 is not old enough to ultimately satisfy the demands of its publics after over 120 years in the country (Awosope, 2014).

The question that readily comes to mind is, is it that public relations strategies which are plans, ideas, blueprints, or concepts designed to combat certain challenges encountered or foreseen by organisations in the course of dealing with their publics had not been put to use by successive managements of the sector to resolve organisation-customer related issues or is it that public relations as a profession which has been in existence in Nigeria since 1963 is not recognized as the panacea by those statutorily saddled with the provision of dependable, affordable and sustainable electricity to power the economy? This development seem to be responsible for the numerous complaints that had sometimes, led customers resorting to confrontational approaches with officials of these distribution firms in retaliation to substandard services rendered. Based on this premise, this study set out to ascertain how Port Harcourt and Benin Electricity Distribution Companies used public relations strategies to address the plethora of customer complaints from the year 2013 to 2022.

Brief Profile of Port Harcourt Electricity Distribution Company

Port Harcourt Electricity Distribution Company (PHEDC) was officially inaugurated on the 1st day of November, 2013 by the Bureau for Public Enterprise (BPE) (Agency of the Federal Government of Nigeria) as one of the 11 successor companies that took over electricity distribution which was one of the priority functions of the unbundled and defunct Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN). PHEDC emerged as a power distribution company, through a rigorously contested tender and bidding process (outright acquisition) with a mandate to purchase power from the Transmission Company of Nigeria (TCN) and distribute same to the end users. The company is also saddled with the responsibility of billing customers in return for services rendered in its area of jurisdiction.

The company was allocated a franchise covering four states in the South-South region of Nigeria which include: Rivers State, Bayelsa State, Akwa Ibom State

and Cross River State. The organisation is privately owned and managed by four Power Consortiums. The company's vision statement is "To be the most efficient and sustainable utility in Nigeria and the best provider of services." Its mission statement is "We supply quality and reliable power safely to our valued customers." The corporate headquarters of the company is at No. 1 Moscow Road, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. The Public Relations Unit in the organisation is referred to as Corporate Communications Unit.

1.1.2 Brief Profile of Benin Electricity Distribution Company

The Benin Electricity Distribution Company (BEDC), like the PHEDC was put in place on the 1st day of November 2013 by the Bureau of Public Enterprise (BPE) to take over the distribution of power; a function hitherto, undertaken by the defunct and unbundled Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN). The company claims to be the fourth largest DISCO in geographic terms and the third largest in terms of households. The Company's Corporate Headquarter is located at No. 5 Akpakpava Road, Benin City, Edo State. It has a joint venture partnership with Vigeo Power Limited and a franchise covering Edo State, Ondo State, Delta State and parts of Ekiti State. BEDC's vision statement is "To be the leading electricity provider, enabling sustainable economic and technological growth and add value to all stakeholders". The Mission statement is "Providing reliable and safe electricity in the most cost effective way". The Public Relations Unit of BEDC like that of PHED is also known as Corporate Communications Unit. The Unit is manned by two permanent staff including the head of the unit who is addressed as Head of Corporate Communications. The Head of Corporate Communications reports to and takes directive from the Chief of Corporate Services Department implying that corporate communications is domiciled in Corporate Services Department. (Adekunle, 2017)

Statement of the Problem

In a bid to address the persistent and numerous complaints by consumers of electricity in Nigeria, the Federal Government took a bold step on the 3rd of November, 2013, by unbundling the former Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN) into 11 distribution companies (DISCOs), six generation companies (GENCOs) and one transmission company (TCN). The notion of the government's action was to remove government's bureaucratic interferences, address the plethora of customer complaints, create competition and enhance service delivery to their publics. However, some customers of PHEDC and BEDC are of the opinion that the privatisation programme is nine years old and the anticipated changes and promises made by the federal government were yet to be realized. They also claim that the public relations issues that led to the balkanisation of the sector such as

unruly behaviour of some staff, lack of information dissemination on company's corporate policies, unrealistic billing method, lack of dedicated stakeholders' fora, corruption and lack of mutual trust among others were yet to be addressed by the distribution companies.

The companies on their part had stated that all contending issues raised by customers before the privatisation era had been addressed within the first five years of operation in their various franchises. The problem of this study therefore, was predicated on the need to comparatively analyze the extent to which the public relations strategies adopted by both companies have been used to address their customers' challenges.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study was to investigate how public relations strategies of PHEDC and BEDC have addressed the companies' public relations challenges.

The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Analyse comparatively the extent to which public relations strategies adopted by Port Harcourt and Benin Electricity Distribution Companies conformed to public relations practice
2. **Re**Appraise comparatively the extent to which Port Harcourt and Benin Electricity Distribution Companies are committed to the implementation of their public relations strategies.
3. Find out the extent of customers' awareness of communication channels used by Port Harcourt and Benin Electricity Distribution Companies in the implementation of their public relations strategies; and
4. Ascertain how these strategies have addressed customers' complaints in these organisations.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. To what extent are the public relations strategies used by Port Harcourt and Benin Electricity Distribution Companies conformed to public relations practice?
2. What is the extent of commitment of the companies to the implementation of their public relations strategies?
3. What is the extent of customers' awareness of communication channels used by the firms in the implementation of their public relations strategies?
4. To what extent have the public relations strategies adopted by the companies addressed their customers' complaints?

1.1. Significance of the Study

This study practically, is expected to benefit the government as policy makers as the outcome will be instrumental in drafting of policies for efficient running of both public and private sector driven economies. It is expected that the electricity distribution sector will also benefit from the outcome as the study has revealed certain facts which hitherto, were not conspicuous. The society is not left out as the outcome may also improve service delivery to the entire society at large. Theoretically, the academia will also benefit from this work as it has tested the theories guiding the study; contributed to the body of knowledge and provided the needed literature for researchers willing to carry out further investigations in this area of study.

Scope of the Study

Theoretically, the study focused on a comparative analysis of the public relations strategies of Port Harcourt and Benin Electricity Distribution Companies. It examined independently, the public relations strategies implemented by the companies; assessed the extent of implementation of the public relations policies of the two organisations and noted the similarities and dissimilarities of the policies if any.

Geographically, this study covered Rivers and Akwa Ibom states out of the four states domiciled in Port Harcourt Electricity Distribution Company franchise which includes Rivers, Bayelsa, Akwa-Ibom and Cross River. It also covered Delta and Edo states out of the four states in the Benin Electricity Distribution Company franchise which are: Edo, Delta, Ondo and parts of Ekiti States.

Theoretical Framework

The Stakeholder theory by Edward Freeman posits that organisations have stakeholders who naturally, are classified as individuals and groups that benefit from it or are adversely affected by the organisation's operations. According to Freeman and Hunt (1984), the stakeholder theory recognises the diverse groups and individuals that are affected in one way or another, by the activities of an organisation. The theory stipulates and recommends the ways by which the collective interests of stakeholders would be catered for by the management of an organisation.

The Excellence theory of public relations by James Grunig (1985) posits that for an organisation to be effective, it must behave in ways that solve the problems and satisfy the goals of stakeholders as well as management. If it does not, stakeholders will either pressure the organisation to change or oppose it in ways that add cost and risk to organisational policies. The organisation must behave in socially acceptable ways by scanning their environment to identify publics who are affected

by potential organisational decisions and policies or those who want the organisations to make decisions and policies that will be favourable to them. The theory also highlights the importance of two-way symmetrical communications among internal publics as key to industrial harmony.

This study therefore, relies on the guidance and recommendations of both theories above, taking into consideration, the diversity in nature of their numerous stakeholders while seeking the best of ways of satisfying their peculiar needs. Both theories are therefore, relevant to this study.

Concept of Public Relations

Adegoke (2001) states that the concept of public relations is a deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics and that such deliberate efforts should take a long term view of the entire market situation and monitor it to avoid crises. Rubel (2007) proposes that common activities of public relations include speaking at conferences, working with the media, crisis communications, social media engagement and employee communication. Public relations is a vital tool in the management of any organisation because it provides the link between the organisation and its environment. Besides, the link enables both the organisation and its publics to achieve their objectives independently. That is, the goal of attracting patronage of the product or services on the part of the organisation and that of desired satisfaction from the services by the publics.

Concept of Public Relations Strategy and Tactics

According to Gregory (2010) "Public relations strategy is the overall approach that is taken to a programme or campaign. It is the coordinating theme or factor, the guiding principle; the big idea, the rationale behind the tactical programme" (p.118). Public relations strategies are typically designed based on prevailing issues arising from analysed research data of specific challenges. The strategy of a public relations campaign is definitely not the same as an objective of the campaign. This means that strategies are conceived from the information derived from the objectives of the campaign. The tactics of the public relations campaign is also derived from the strategies of the campaign. It simply follows that there can be no good public relations strategy without a good objective and no good tactics without a good or sustainable strategy. In a nutshell, strategy simply means 'how' an objective can be achieved while tactics is all about 'what' can be done in order to achieve the strategy.

Corporate Image and Corporate Identity

Ohiagu (2015) sees corporate image as "... picture of an organisation which any individual or group of stakeholders have about an organisation at any point in

time. It is a mental representation of what the stakeholders believe is true about the organisation” (p.190). This implies that the impression of the corporate image of an organisation in the minds of the publics of an organisation is not “cast in stone” but varies, depending on the prevailing level of mutual understanding and circumstance between the publics and the organisation. Ohiagu (2015) reiterates that corporate image of an organisation varies from public to public, for instance how the employees of an organisation perceive the corporate image of an organisation may be totally different from how the community, customers, suppliers and other stakeholders perceive the same organisation.

According to Adekunle (2017) corporate identity is the totality of all an organisation communicates intentionally or unintentionally via various cues while corporate image on its part is the overall mental perception of a corporate organisation in the minds of its publics. Wragg (1992) on his part, sees corporate identity as “... the single image presented by a company or other organisations, giving an impression of unity through all the various manifestations of its activities” (p. 96). The identity of a corporate organisation readily plays a vital role in the life of its publics because of its instant mental evocations at first sight. If the public feels irked on sighting a corporate identity of organisation, then there is a problem.

Customer Relations Practices of PHEDC.

- 1. Customer Bill of Rights:** This strategy is targeted at educating customers to know their rights. The objective here is to make the customer have a sense of belonging that PHEDC cares for customers’ welfare. The forum is targeted to create the impression that PHEDC is a credible organisation devoid of sharp practices.
- 2. Safety Campaign:** This strategy is aimed at spreading the need for safety precautions among customers. The idea of this campaign is to discourage all forms of harmful practices and usages among customers within the franchise. People are also advised against tampering with equipment belonging to the organisation to avoid been electrocuted.
- 3. Energy Efficiency Campaign:** This strategy is targeted at customers’ awareness on the need to conserve energy rather than wasting it. Customers are advised in the forum to always switch off their equipment/lighting points when they are not in use in order to save energy not needed at a particular time. They are also advised to use energy saving bulbs and equipment to maximize output and lower their consumption levels.
- 4. Prepaid Metering/E-Payment Campaign:** This campaign is geared towards persuading or wooing customers to respond to prompt payment of bills and

for customers to know the benefits of the e-payment platform and digital metering system. The strategy is aimed at redirecting customers to have faith in the organisation and to be aware of the efforts of the organisation to eradicate payment discrepancies of the past.

5. **Radio and Television Interactive Engagements:** This strategy utilizes radio and television and it's targeted at disseminating information to customers across the franchise and receiving instant feedback on topical issues of concern in the franchise. Stakeholders and opinion leaders are usually invited for the talk shows and spontaneous contributions and feedbacks from listeners are also received.
6. **24/7 Call Centre Lines:** These call centre lines are set up with a motive to receiving information, complaints and feedbacks from customers (two-way communication). The objective is to bridge any communication gap between the organisation and the customers. Customers are also advised to use the call centre lines to report any suspicious or unidentified personnel to the organisation or the law enforcement agencies. These telephone lines are also expected to be used to inform the company should there be any fire outbreak, accident involving company's facilities etc. (Koko, 2017).

Customer Relations Practices of BEDC

1. **Quarterly Press Briefing with Managing Director/Chief Executive Officer:** The Company holds quarterly media briefing with the MD/CEO to intimate the media on the activities of the company. The objective is to keep the media abreast of activities of the organisation and to maintain good relationship with the media. The forum is also used to clarify any topical issues bordering on public interest and that which may affect the image of the corporate organisation that may have occurred within the quarter. It is also a medium for feedback.
2. **Radio Talk Shows:** Officers from the Corporate Communications Department make use of these talk shows on radio to interact with relevant stakeholders to address topical issues bordering on electricity distribution, share ideas and receive feedbacks on the organisation's programmes. The forum is also used to announce innovations and developments in the industry to the public.
3. **Town Hall Meetings with Customers:** Town hall meetings are held intermittently with customers to address issues bordering on customers' safety, conservation of energy, energy theft through illegal connections, the need for regular payment of bills and manhandling of company officials

while on duty. The forum also avails the company of the opportunity to know the mind of the customers.

4. **Stakeholders Engagement:** The Company carries out intermittent engagements with stakeholders like the Edo State House of Assembly and other State Houses of Assembly within the franchise. The objective is to create mutual understanding between the company and the law makers. The engagements are also used to lobby the law makers on matters of electricity distribution in the franchise.
5. **Documentaries on Company's Activities:** The objective of these documentaries is to further show case the company's activities to the publics (Adekunle, 2017).

Empirical Review

Nwachukwu (2008) did a study entitled "As assessment of cordially effects of public relations strategies adopted by the National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN), Aba in the Management of the 2004-2006 Internal Crises." The aim of the study was to find out how organisations could use public relations to manage internal crisis. The study design was survey and the questionnaire and personal interviews were research instruments used in collecting data from 20% of the 250 staff of the institution. Among the interview questions were; "What are the public relations activities that would help the organisation achieve higher performance?" "What are the public relations activities NINLAN adopted in the management of 2004-2006 internal crises? Results of the study revealed that public relations strategies /tactics were not used in managing the crises and so the institute was eventually closed down by former President Olusegun Obasanjo.

In conclusion, the outcome of this study portrays public relations as a potent management tool that should not be treated with levity. In essence, communication scholars widely describe public relations as effective machinery for conflict/crisis prevention and management and strongly advocate for its use by managers across different strata regardless of the nature of their organisations. It is obvious that peradventure, the management of NINLAN Aba had implored the use of public relations strategies and tactics in managing the crisis in the institute, the reverse would have been the case. It was recommended among others that; management of organisations should make provision for public relations units or departments in their organisations or engage professional consultants to advice management.

This study is relevant to my study because it was carried out to determine the effectiveness of public relations strategies in an organisation.

Odigbo (2012) in his study entitled “Political Marketing and Public Relations Strategies for Peaceful Elections in Nigeria” The objectives of the study among others were: to ascertain the degree of employment of product concept by Nigerian politicians and political parties in shopping electoral votes. The research design was survey. Sample size was 333. Instrument used was the questionnaire. Data generated were analyzed in percentage frequencies. Finally, the result among others showed that; a greater proportion of politicians in Nigeria do not adhere to the use of ethical public relations strategies in seeking for electorate’s votes. It also showed that they are mostly engulfed in using very crude methods and unethical practices in securing votes to themselves.

In conclusion, the result of this work shows that some politicians in Nigeria are still ignorant of the indispensable role public relations plays in the political and electioneering processes in a nation. It is most likely, they are yet to understand that with effective public relations practice, their political aspirations and philosophies will be easily sold out which in turn, enhances its acceptability by their constituents. Effective public relations promote mutual relationship between politicians and their constituents. This understanding goes on to promote peace, development and equity in the society.

The researcher recommended among others that; politicians should implore effective public relations strategies and tactics in the marketing of their political image and ideas before, during and after the political electioneering processes; and that politicians use and respect the basic public relations principles of truth, fairness and equity in the process of canvassing for votes and jettison false promises.

This study is relevant to my study because it is about the use of public relations strategies to achieve set goals.

Omoshue and Iroham (2012) carried out a study entitled “Using Government Public Relations as Crisis Management Tool among the Urhobo, Ijaw and Itsekiri in Warri, Delta State”. The objectives of the study among others were to: examine the public relations tools used by the Delta State Government in the management of the Urhobo, Ijaw and Itsekiri crisis in Warri and its environs; find out the media/channels of mass communication that were used by the Delta State Government in the crisis.

The research questions were: To what extent was the use of public relations functions or law enforcement agents as an approach in the management of the Urhobo, Ijaw and Itsekiri ineffective? And, what were the public relations tools used by the Delta State Government in the management of the Urhobo, Ijaw and Itsekiri crisis in Warri and its environs?

The study’s population was made up of males and females between 24- 40 years old; the universe of study was the population of Warri City which, according

to the 2006 census was projected to be 311, 970,021 out of which a sample size of 400 from 21 communities were methodologically extracted. The study adopted survey as its design and the instrument was questionnaire. The study data were presented in tables and were analyzed using simple percentages. The result of the study showed that the use of public relations strategies via the newspapers, radio and television were effective in the dissemination of peace messages to the people. Though out of the three media of communication that were used, the newspapers received the highest rating.

In conclusion, the result of the study revealed that the use of dialogue as a public relations approach was better appreciated than the use of force by the law enforcement agents whose efforts only worsened the crisis. The results also confirmed that the use of other public relations approaches through the Community Development Communities and the Ministry of Inter-Ethnic Relations and Conflict Resolution were very effective in the management of the crisis. It was recommended among others that: Henceforth, the use of PR as a tool for crisis management should be encouraged than the use of brute force as that only succeeded in escalating the momentum of the crisis.

The Study above is also related to my study because it is based on using public relations strategies in resolving issues among publics.

Methodology

The research design used in the study was survey. The population of this study was 8,800,000. This comprised the population of the Port Harcourt Electricity Distribution Company (PHEDC) which stood at 4,800,000 (**Source: interview with Livingstone Koko, Corporate Communications Dept, PHEDC**) and that of the Benin Electricity Distribution Company (BEDC) which stood at 4,000,000 (**Source: interview with Tayo Adekunle, Corporate Communications Dept, BEDC**). The sample size for this study was 384 which were derived using Philip Meyers sampling scale at 95% confidence level. The instruments used in this study were the questionnaire and interview schedules. The questionnaire contained section A with five items relating to respondents' demographics and section B which was formulated using the 4-point Likert scale contained twenty-two items. The 384 samples were distributed proportionately according to the companies' aggregate population. This resulted to PHEDC having 209 (54.55%) while BEDC had 175 (45.45%). Two research assistants were engaged by the researcher to assist in the distribution of the samples. The administration of the questionnaire was done using systematic random sampling based on a skip interval of 3 on households in selected areas however, the process suffered 26 casualties and the final figure used stood at 358. The data collected from the field in section A of the instrument were presented

in simple percentages, frequencies and tables; while those collected from section B of the questionnaire were analyzed using the weighted mean score 2.5. Using the mean criterion to grade the acceptance of the items on the questionnaire was simple and interesting as any item that scored 2.5 mean and above was accepted while those items that scored 2.4 mean and below were deemed as rejected by the respondents. The interviews conducted on the Heads, Corporate Communications Department of PHEDC and BEDC were qualitatively analysed.

Table 1: Meyer’s Population Sampling Procedure

<u>Population Size</u>	<u>Sample Size</u>
Infinity	384
500,000	384
100,000	383
50,000	381
10,000	370
5,000	357
3,000	341
2,000	322
1,000	278

Source: Stacks and Hockings (1992) *Essentials of communication research*.

Results and Discussions

Table 2: Public relations strategies adopted by PHEDC

		PHEDC						
S/N	ITEMS		A3	bbb	SD1	TOTAL	WMS	REMARKS
1.	I have observed that security guards of PHEDC do not harass customers but are friendly, vigilant and very helpful.	42	62	48	44	494	2.5	Accepted
2.	PHEDC customer care officials do not snub customers but listen to our complaints and proffer solutions to the problems.	32	27	53	84	399	2.0	Rejected
3.	As a customer of PHEDC, I am impressed with the company’s “customer safety and bill of rights” campaign.	17	65	44	70	346	2.1	Rejected
4.	As a customer, I am happy with the transparent method of billing (pre-paid metering) and convenient e-payment initiatives by PHEDC	93	41	33	29	590	3.0	Accepted
5.	I have been sufficiently educated by PHEDC’s “energy usage and conservation” campaigns for customers.	53	47	40	56	489	2.5	Accepted

6.	As a customer, I am aware that PHEDC organises town-hall meetings and stakeholders' forum to dialogue with us.	71	64	36	25	573	2.9	Accepted
7.	I know that PHEDC has dedicated telephone lines, radio and TV interactive programmes for customers' complaints/feedback channels.	68	57	29	42	547	2.8	Accepted

Source: field survey, 2019

Average Weighted Mean Score = 2.5

The data presented in Table 2 depicts the public relations strategies adopted by the Port Harcourt Electricity Distribution Company (PHEDC). Out of the seven items (1-7) put forward for responses, five items were accepted with an average weighted mean of 2.5. The responses from customers infer that the public relations strategies adopted and used by the PHEDC were familiar to their customers.

Table 3: Public relations strategies adopted by BEDC

BEDC								
S/N	Items				SD 1	TOTAL	WMS	REMARKS
1.	I have observed that security guards of BEDC do not harass customers but are friendly, vigilant and very helpful	39	42	55	26	418	2.6	Accepted
2.	BEDC customer care officials do not snub customers but listens to our complaints and proffer solutions accordingly.	36	43	50	33	406	2.5	Accepted
3.	As a customer of BEDC, I am impressed with the company's "safety and bill of rights" campaign.	23	19	76	44	345	2.1	Rejected
4.	As a customer, I am happy with the transparent method of billing (pre-paid metering) and convenient e-payment initiatives by BEDC.	52	37	48	25	440	2.7	Accepted
5.	I have been sufficiently educated by BEDC's "energy usage and conservation" campaigns for customers.	21	28	60	53	341	2.1	Rejected
6.	I am aware that BEDC organises Town-hall meetings and stakeholders' forum to dialogue with customers.	43	47	58	14	443	2.7	Accepted
7.	I know that BEDC has dedicated telephone lines, radio and TV interactive programmes for customers' complaints/feedback channels.	58	53	31	20	473	2.9	Accepted

Source: field survey, 2019

Average Weighted Mean Score = 2.5

The data presented in Table 3 depict the public relations strategies adopted by the Benin Electricity Distribution Company (BEDC). Out of the seven items (1-7) put forward for responses, five items were accepted with an average weighted mean score of 2.5. This invariably depict that the public relations strategies adopted by the BEDC were familiar to their customers.

Comparatively, results obtained from tables 2 and 3 showed that the customers of PHEDC and BEDC were familiar with the public relations strategies adopted by both companies. The data also showed that five out of the seven items were accepted by respondents from both companies, inferring that the adopted strategies of both companies were not only familiar but acceptable problem solving items to their publics.

Table 4: PHEDC’s extent of commitment to its public relations strategies

PHEDC								
S/N	Items	SA 4	A 3	D 2	SD 1	TOTAL	WMS	REMARKS
8.	I do not have to bribe PHEDC officials to perform their duties for me	34	41	89	32	469	2.4	Rejected
9.	PHEDC responds quickly to complaints and repairs or replaces damaged electricity distribution equipment.	17	19	78	82	383	1.8	Rejected
10.	I am aware that PHEDC has stopped illegal disconnections and issuance of estimated bills to customers	0	0	123	73	319	1.6	Rejected
11.	I am aware that PHEDC implements customers’ bill of rights and other agreements reached at town hall and stakeholders’ meetings.	47	32	76	41	477	2.4	Rejected

Source: field survey, 2019

Average Weighted Mean Score = 2.1

The data displayed in Table 4 depict the extent of commitment of the PHEDC to the implementation of their public relations strategies as perceived by respondents. All the four items (8-11) put forward for responses, were rejected with an average weighted mean score of 2.1. This result simply indicate that the commitment of the PHEDC to the implementation of its public relations strategies were not efficient.

Table 5: BEDC’s extent of commitment to its public relations strategies

BEDC								
S/N	Items	SA	A 3	D 2	SD 1	TOTAL	WMS	REMARKS
8	I do not have to bribe BEDC officials to perform their duties for me	18	21	68	55	326	2.0	Rejected
9.	BEDC responds quickly to complaints and repairs or replaces damaged electricity distribution equipment.	9	13	64	76	279	1.7	Rejected
10.	I am aware that BEDC has stopped illegal disconnections and issuance of estimated bills to customers	27	32	73	30	380	2.3	Rejected
11.	I am aware that BEDC implements customers’ bill of rights and other agreements reached at town hall and stakeholders’ meetings.	8	12	81	61	291	1.8	Rejected

Source: field survey, 2019

Average Weighted Mean Score = 1.9

The data displayed in Table 5 show the extent of commitment of the BEDC to the implementation of its public relations strategies. All the four items (8-11) put forward were rejected by respondents with an average weighted mean score of 1.9. This result indicates that the BEDC was not committed to the implementation of its public relations strategies. Comparatively, it can be deduced from the data displayed in Tables 4 and 5 that the PHEDC and the BEDC were not committed to the implementation of their public relations strategies. Commitment here refers to efforts made by the company to address the issues that customers have persistently complained about.

Table 6: Extent of customers’ awareness of the communication channels used by the PHEDC in the implementation of its public relations strategies.

PHEDC								
S/N	Items	SA	A 3	D 2	SD 1	TOTAL	WMS	REMARKS
12.	PHEDC uses radio/TV interactive programmes and advertorials on the company’s policies in its newsletters, newspapers and magazines.	49	57	35	55	492	2.5	Accepted
13.	I use PHEDC’s social media accounts like facebook, twitter and whatsapp to interact with the company.	51	28	60	57	465	2.4	Rejected
14.	I am aware that PHEDC also uses traditional rulers, CDCs, youth fora and town criers to communicate in the rural areas.	58	45	61	32	521	2.6	Accepted

15.	I am aware that PHEDC shares Information on company policies to us in their town hall meetings and stakeholders' forum.	41	69	58	28	515	2.6	Accepted
-----	---	----	----	----	----	-----	-----	----------

Source: field survey, 2019

Average Weighted Mean Score = 2.5

The result displayed in Table 6 depicts the extent of customers' awareness of the communication channels used by the Port Harcourt Electricity Distribution Company (PHEDC) in the implementation of its public relations strategies. Out of the four items (12-15) put forward for responses, three items were accepted and only one item was rejected by respondents with an average weighted mean score of 2.5. This infers that the extent of customers' awareness of the communication channels used by the PHEDC in the implementation of their public relations strategies can be described as well above average.

Table 7: Extent of customers' awareness of the communication channels used by the BEDC in the implementation of its public relations strategies.

BEDC								
S/N	Items	SA 4	A 3	D 2	SD 1	TOTAL	WMS	REMARKS
12.	I listen/watch BEDC's radio/TV interactive programmes and also read its advertorials on their company's policies in its newsletters, newspapers and magazines	53	38	32	39	429	2.6	Accepted
13.	I use BEDC's social media accounts like facebook, twitter and whatsapp to interact with the company.	37	41	25	59	380	2.3	Rejected
14.	I am aware that BEDC also use traditional rulers, CDCs, youth fora and town criers to communicate in the rural areas.	48	52	38	24	448	2.7	Accepted
15.	I watch BEDC's documentaries on company policies and progress report, and attend their town-hall/ stakeholders' forum.	44	51	30	37	426	2.6	Accepted

Source: field survey, 2019.

Average Weighted Mean Score = 2.6

The results in Table 7 depict the extent of customers' awareness of the communication channels used by the Benin Electricity Distribution Company (BEDC) in the implementation of its public relations strategies. Out of the four items (12-15) put forward for responses, three items were accepted and one item was rejected with an average weighted mean score of 2.6. This result indicates that

customers are very familiar with the communication channels used by the BEDC in the implementation of its public relations strategies.

Comparatively, the data in Tables 6 and 7 shows that customers of the PHEDC and BEDC were familiar with the communication channels put forward for responses in the implementation of their public relations strategies.

Table 8: Extent that the public relations strategies adopted by PHEDC have addressed customers’ complaints.

PHEDC								
S/N	Items	SA 4	A 3	D 2	SD 1	TOTAL	WMS	REMARKS
16.	I’m happy that the company now tells us about efforts made to end payment for replacement of damaged equipment by customers, illegal disconnections, estimated billings and issues of bribery by their officials.	36	31	88	41	454	2.3	Rejected
17.	I am better informed about PHEDC’s policies and programmes through one-on-one dialogue in its town hall and stakeholders’ interactive meetings.	32	53	69	42	467	2.4	Rejected
18.	I believe that improved public Enlightenment campaigns have increased mutual trust and reduced information gap between me and the company.	64	57	35	40	535	2.7	Accepted

Source: field survey, 2019.

Average weighted mean score = 2.5.

The result displayed in Table 8 portrays the extent that the public relations strategies adopted by the PHEDC have addressed the complaints by their customers. To this effect, three items (16-18) were put forward for responses. Out of which only one item was accepted and the other two were rejected with an average weighted mean score of 2.5. This infers that the implementation of the public relations strategies adopted by the PHEDC has marginally addressed the complaints of its customers.

Table 9: Extent that the public relations strategies adopted by BEDC have addressed customers’ complaints

BEDC								
S/N	Items	SA 4	A 3	D 2	SD 1	TOTAL	WMS	RE MARKS

16	I'm happy that the company now informs us about efforts made to end payment for replacement of damaged equipment by customers, illegal disconnections, estimated billings and issues of bribery by their officials	22	31	74	35	364	2.2	Rejected
17	I am better informed about BEDC's policies and programmes through one-on-one dialogue in its town hall and stakeholders' interactive meetings.	45	47	39	31	430	2.6	Accepted
18	I believe that improved public enlightenment campaigns have increased mutual trust and reduced information gap between I and the company.	55	46	30	31	449	2.7	Accepted

Source: field survey, 2019

Average Weighted Mean Score =2.5

The data displayed in Table 9 shows the extent that the public relations strategies adopted by the BEDC have addressed the complaints of its customers. Out of the three items put forward for responses, two items were accepted and one item rejected with an average weighted mean score of 2.5. This result means that the public relations strategies adopted and implemented by the BEDC has also, marginally addressed the complaints their customers. Comparatively, the data displayed in Table 8 depict the public relations strategies adopted by the PHEDC marginally addressed the complaints of its customers. Similarly, the data displayed in table 9 showed that those adopted by the BEDC have also marginally, addressed the complaints of its customers.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1: To what extent are the public relations strategies adopted by Port Harcourt and Benin Electricity Distribution Companies conformed to public relations practice?

The representative of the Head, Corporate Communications of PHEDC in an interview with the researcher had stated that the company adopted the public relations strategies stated in Table 2 for disseminating company policies and programmes and also to receive instant feedback from customers. According to the company's representative, all strategies were deliberately adopted to address the various complaints by their customers. The data in Table 2 (with an average weighted mean of 2.5) agrees with the standpoint of the company that it used these

strategies because response rate showed that their publics were well acquainted with a good number of the strategies outlined by the researcher.

In BEDC franchise, the Head, Corporate Communications had also stated that the company used public relations strategies stated in Table 3. The data agreed with the assertion of BEDC's Head of Corporate Communications that the company used the stated public relations strategies as an average weighted mean of 2.6 further confirmed this position.

Comparatively, data in Tables 2 and 3 showed that the public relations strategies used by the Port Harcourt Electricity Distribution Company were somewhat similar to those used by the Benin Electricity Distribution Company. The reason for so much similarity in strategies of both organisations could have been as a result of their affiliations to the Nigeria Electricity Regulatory Commission (NERC). On the issue of conformity of the public relations strategies adopted by PHEDC and BEDC to public relations practice, the strategies adopted by both companies conformed with the analysis that PR strategies are usually problem solving plans, ideas, blueprints or roadmaps used by management of organisations to address specific problems between an organisation and its publics in order to create mutual relationship and goodwill, Ajala (2001).

McElreath (1996) argues that public relations activities are naturally encapsulated into two broad roles, namely: technical and problem solving and it is seldom difficult to draw the line of separation between the two concepts. It can therefore be stated that the daily routines of public relations practitioners typically involve the ability to solve problems through the application of acquired technical skills. Analyzing the word "strategy" Porter (1985) states that "strategy is a set of offensive or defensive actions to create a defensible position in an industry, to cope successfully with competitive forces and thus get a higher return on investment" (p. 66) Wright, Kroll and Parnell (1997) explaining the word strategy argue that "strategy is the set of plans from top management to achieve results consistent with the organisational mission and objectives" (p. 88). Again, Porter (1996) adds that "strategy means performing different activities to those performed by rivals or performing the same activities differently" (p. 67). To answer the research question, it can be stated that the public relations strategies adopted and used by Port Harcourt Electricity Distribution Company and Benin Electricity Distribution Company were somewhat similar and they conformed to public relations practice because they were purpose-driven ideas/plans aimed at solving organisation-consumer relationship problems.

Research Question 2: What is the extent of commitment of Port Harcourt and Benin Electricity Distribution Companies to the implementation of their public relations strategies?

The representative of PHEDC had stated that the company had resolved all controversial issues affecting customer relations as stated in Table 4. The data showed an average weighted mean of 2.1 which means that the PHEDC had not put in enough commitment to the implementation of the public relations strategies it adopted. Similarly, the BEDC's Head, Corporate Communications had stated that the company had adequately addressed troubling issues as stated in Table 5. The data in Table 5 showed an average weighted mean of 1.9 inferring that the BEDC had not been committed to the implementation of its public relations strategies.

Comparatively, the implication of these data is that the implementation of the public relations strategies of both companies were lacking in commitment. Commitment in this regard means performance and results that are visible to the perception of publics of both organisations. It therefore signifies that both PHEDC and BEDC were not on the same page with their publics. The data showed that both PHEDC's and BEDC's stance of fully implementing their public relations strategies did not agree with the stance of their publics. This finding corroborates Stone (1995) who noted that the dissatisfied customers are the ones that have identified themselves and defined a problem for the organization. This seeming lack of commitment by PHEDC and BEDC in the implementation of their public relations strategies attests to the fact that public relations does not thrive in an atmosphere of linear communication. Public relations thrive only in an atmosphere where mutual trust and understanding and respect for stakeholders' interest prevail. To answer the research question, it can be stated that PHEDC and BEDC did not show adequate commitment in the implementation of their public relations strategies.

Research Question 3: What are the communication channels used by Port Harcourt and Benin Electricity Distribution Companies in the implementation of their public relations strategies?

The representative of PHEDC had stated that the company adopted the channels stated in Table 6. The data in Table 6 showed an average weighted mean score of 2.5 as customers' response depicting that the PHEDC actually used the stated media in communicating with their publics in its activities.

On the part of the BEDC, the Head, Corporate Communications had also stated that the company adopted the channels stated in Table 4.6. The data in 7 showed that an average weighted mean score of 2.6 meaning that the assertion of BEDC's Head, Corporate Communications that the company used the mentioned communication channels in its public relations activities are not in doubt.

Comparatively, the data in Tables 6 and 7 confirmed that both PHEDC and BEDC used the communication channels outlined by their representatives. The data also showed that the communication channels adopted by the PHEDC in its public relations activities were somewhat similar to those adopted by the BEDC

nevertheless; the BEDC used two distinct items such as: quarterly media briefings by the MD/CEO and the sponsorship of documentaries to publicize the company's policies and programmes on selected TV stations within its area of operation. These extra strategies used by the BEDC gave the company the comparative advantage over the PHEDC. This outcome agrees with Hasan (2013) and Ajala (2001) opinion on the essence of effective two-way communication between an organisation and its publics. To answer the research question, it can be stated that the communication channels used by the PHEDC in the implementation of its public relations strategies are to a large extent similar to those adopted by the BEDC but for two distinct strategies used by the BEDC which the PHEDC did not use. The data also confirmed that the PHEDC and the BEDC actually used the communication channels as their customers affirmed their strong awareness of the communication channels.

Research question 4: To what extent have the public relations strategies of Port Harcourt and Benin Electricity Distribution Companies addressed their customers' complaints?

The representative of PHEDC had stated that the company had addressed all contentious issues arising from customers' complaints. The data in Table 8 showed an average weighted mean score of 2.5. Similarly, the Head, Corporate Communications of BEDC had also stated that the company had resolved all controversial issues with its customers. The data in Table 9 depict an average weighted mean score of 2.5.

These data showed that the PHEDC's management has performed fairly in the implementation of its public relations strategies. Though the company had stated it adopted and implemented a set of strategies aimed at solving long term worries of their customers. The data showed that the customers of the company seem not to feel much of the impact of the problems solved. The data showed that the public relations strategies adopted by PHEDC have only marginally addressed the complaints of its customers. This situation agrees with Ajala (2010) in her argument that public relations activities typically begins and ends with problem solving functions.

For the BEDC, the data in Table 9 showed that the public relations strategies adopted by the company have also marginally addressed the complaints of its customers. It also showed that the BEDC received an average weighted mean score of 2.5 indicating that the company had done fairly well to address its customers' complaints. This scenario agrees with McElreath (1996) that public relations activities are naturally encapsulated into two broad roles, namely: technical and problem solving and it is seldom difficult to draw the line of separation between the two concepts. It can therefore be stated that the daily routines of public

relations practitioners typically involve the ability to solve problems through the application of acquired technical skills. This seems to fall short of Ekiye's (2017) view that:

...with the privatisation of the power sector, the expectation of everybody is that there should be uninterrupted power supply and resolution of customers' complaints. Anything short of that will translate to failure on the part of the new owners to deliver. We are however, tilting towards that direction (p.20). To answer the research question, it can be deduced from the data that the public relations strategies adopted by the PHEDC and BEDC have marginally addressed the complaints of their customers.

Conclusions

This study comparatively analysed the public relations strategies of the Port Harcourt and Benin Electricity Distribution Companies. Findings indicate that the PHEDC and BEDC adopted somewhat similar public relations strategies. It also showed that the adopted strategies of both organisations were in conformity to the standard public relations practice. On the issue of commitment to the implementation of their PR strategies, data showed that PHEDC and BEDC were not committed to the implementation of their public relations strategies. The study also showed that both organisations used all communication channels as claimed by their managements in the implementation of their public relations strategies. Data available state that the public relations strategies used by both organisations have marginally addressed the plaguing problems experienced by their publics but there are rooms for improvements to be made for the betterment of the industry.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. There is need for PHEDC and BEDC to step up their public enlightenment campaigns/workshops to enhance awareness of their public relations strategies/programmes among their publics.
2. The managements of PHEDC and BEDC should ensure that all legitimate complaints by customers and agreements reached in stakeholders/town-hall meetings are implemented accordingly by both organisations to send a message of commitment to their publics.
3. The use of the mainstream media by the managements of PHEDC and BEDC as communication channels is efficient but more emphasis should be placed on the companies' use of their social media channels such as facebook, twitter, and whatsapp as this will encourage customers to follow suit.
4. The management of both companies needs to re-evaluate their methodologies used in the implementation of their public relations strategies. Data available

showed that their publics are yet to feel the desired impact of the reforms in the sector.

References

- Adegoke, L.A (2001). *Introduction to public relations: principles, media and methods*. Suick-Temik Publishing Company.
- Adekunle, T. (2017). *Public relations practices*. Talkback Publishers Limited.
- Ajala V.O. (2001). *Public relations: In search of professional excellence*. (3rded). May-Best Publications Limited.
- Awosope, C.A. (2014) *Nigeria electricity industry: issues, challenges & solutions*. Covenant University Press.
- Freeman, E.R; Reed, D.L. (1983) Stockholders and Stakeholders: A New Perspective on Corporate Governance, *California Management Review*, Vol. XXV, No. 3,
- Gregory, A. (2010). *Planning and managing public relations campaigns* (2nd .ed). Kogan Page Limited.
- Gruing, J. & Hunt, T. (1994). *managing public relations*. Rinchart and Winston Inc.,
- Grunig, J. E. (1984) *managing public relations*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Hasan, S. (2013). *Mass communication: principles and concepts*. CBS Publishers and Distributors.
- Marken, G. A. (1990). Corporate image - We all have one, but few work to protect and project it.
- Public Relations Quarterly (Spring), 21-23.
- Mintzberg, H., Ahlstrand, B. &Lampel, J. (1998). *Strategy safari: A guided tour through the wilds of strategic management*. Free Press.
- McElreath, M. P. (1996) *Managing systematic and ethical public relations campaign*. Brown & Benchmark.
- Nwachukwu, F. G., Asadu, A. C. &Asak, M. O. (2012) *Communication theories, models and hypothesis*. Accuracy Prints.
- Odigbo, B. (2012). Political Marketing and Public Relations Strategies for Peaceful Elections in Nigeria. *Today's Readings in Mass Communication, Issues, Insights and perspectives*. 13-23.

- Omoshue, J. O. & Iroham, C. B. (2012). Using government public relations as crises management tool among the Urhobo, Ijaw and Itsekiri in Warri, Delta State. *Journal of Linguistics and Communication Studies*. v. 2 no. 1, 2012
- Porter, M.E. (1985). *The Competitive advantage: creating and sustaining superior performance*. Free Press.
- Rubel, G. F. (2007), *Everyday Public Relations for Lawyers*. Doylestown, P.A. (ed.), ISBN 978-0-9801719-0-7
- Stone, N. (1995) *The Management and practice of public Relations*. Macmillan Business.
- Wilcox, D.L; Cameron, G.T; Ault, P.H; Agee, W.K; (2003) *Public relations, strategies & tactics*, 7th edition, Allyn and Bacon.
- Wilson, L. J. (1997). *Strategic program planning for effective public relations campaigns* (2nded.). IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- Wragg, D.W. (1992). *The public relations handbook*. Blackwell Business
- Wright, P.L., Kroll, M.J. & Parnell, J.A. (1997). *Strategic management: concepts and cases*.
Prentice Hall.
- Wu, M.Y. (2004). Public Relations in Taiwan: A 2005 Version. *Public Relations Quarterly*, 49(4), 19-21. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com.libproxy.aalto.fi/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=17249362&site=ehost-live>