

External Communication and Its Influence on Secondary Schools Corporate Image: A Case Study of Kitale Academy Secondary School

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Abstract

Communication by schools with their external publics is crucial for both parties. Stakeholders need to know what happens in schools where their children learn. This study sought to examine the influence of external communication on the corporate image of secondary schools.

The research design adopted was a case study of Kitale Academy Secondary. The target population was 420 people from which a sample of 47 was selected using random sampling and non random sampling. The sample included school administrators, heads of departments, teachers, support staff and students. Data was collected using questionnaires. Analysis was done using basic descriptive statistics.

From the findings of the research it was evident that word of mouth was the channel that was very frequently used by the students, administrators, and heads of departments, teachers and support staff to external target audience. The findings also indicated a strong relationship between feedbacks from external communication on the image of school. Respondents saw their school's corporate image as very positive while also perceiving others outside as seeing the school's image as positive. The researcher recommended that secondary schools to put in place a public relations policy so as to interact positively with their external audience.

Keywords: External Communication, Corporate image, Publics, Audience, Public Relations and feedback.

1.0 Introduction

Several factors have contributed to the increasing importance of corporate image in recent years. For example, the business climate in the United States has become one of environmental complexity and change. This has forced many business enterprises to

significantly alter their strategies to better compete and survive. Corporate image, or reputation, describes the manner in which a company, its activities, and its products or services are perceived by outsiders.

Young (2008) , Citing the case of Virginia Polytechnic Institute poor handling of a shooting crisis on the horrible morning of April 2007 , when the senseless act of a disturbed individual left 32 students and faculty dead, says that “reputation problems grow like weeds in a garden”. The manner in which the college communicated to its target audience was inadequate and unprofessional to the point of communication ruining the corporate image and reputation of the college more than the shooting incident itself. The college did not have an elaborate crisis plan already in place nor did it know how to handle external communication. There after the image of the college continued to slide negatively despite corrective measures that were put in place.

Recent strikes by secondary school students in Kenya have raised serious concerns on how school managers, the government and other stakeholders communicate among themselves to resolve pertinent issues in secondary schools. The rampant chaos is being blamed on poor public relations strategies employed by school managers. It is important that the schools communicate effectively if they are to be perceived positively their publics. This is true because public institutions are accountable to the public in their endeavors. Strikes in public secondary schools and subsequent blame games between school managers and various stakeholders are an indicator that there could be misunderstanding among these parties (The Manager, KIM 2008, September).

1.1 Statement of the problem

Despite use of various channels of communication employed by secondary schools in communicating with their external publics; the external communication is still not adequately addressed with regard to how such communication improves the image of secondary schools. One would for instance ask how do schools rate their relationships with their publics. It is likely therefore that lack of proper external communication by secondary schools negatively affects the corporate image of the schools.

Okumbe (1998) says that a school as an organization consists of individuals whose efforts are deliberately coordinated for the purpose of imparting knowledge, skills and attitudes to students or pupils in order to achieve predetermined educational objectives or goals. The school as an organization exists within an environment both internal and external. The internal environment includes the structures, technology and people found within the organization. The external environment refers to those organizations groups, individuals and forces found outside the educational organization but which have an impact on its effectiveness or survival. To achieve the desired status in the community environment, schools need to communicate effectively with these environments. The survival and effectiveness of the school as an organization will depend on how well it scans and adapts to its external environment. Therefore a school should exploit available channels to communicate effectively. However media reports (Daily Nation) have noted that schools in Kenya lack functional public relations programmes, in the manner of external corporate communication. This has led to negative perception of the schools held by their publics.

The precise aim of this research was to investigate the influence of such communication on Kitale Academy schools’ corporate image. Kitale Academy is a Government Sponsored Public Complex School located in Kitale - Trans Nzoia West District, Rift valley in Kenya.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Communication

According to McQuail (2005), defines communication as the process of sharing ideas information, and messages with others in a particular time and place. Communication includes writing, talking, as well as non – verbal ones, visual and electronic communication; Communication is a vital part of personal life, business, education and any other situation whose people encounter each other. The author further notes that communication takes place in time, and it matters when it takes place in time and it matters when it occurs and how long it takes. It is produced in a given location and reflects features of that context. Such communication serves to define a place for its inhabitants and to establish an identity.

Bernsteen (1991) says that business organizations depend on communication. People must communicate to plan, produces, house, and train and motivate workers; coordinate manufacturing and delivery; persuade customers to buy; and bill them for the sale. For many businesses, nonprofit and government organizations, the product is information services or services rather than something tangible. And information and services are created and delivered by means of communication.

2.2 External Communication

Oliver (2008) defines external communication as that which occurs between managers and people outside the organization. It is the exchange of information and messages between an organization and other organizations, groups, or individuals outside its formal structure. The goals of external communication are to facilitate cooperation with groups such as suppliers, investors, and shareholders, and to present a favorable image of an organization and its products or services to potential and actual customers and to society at large. A variety of channels may be used for external communication, including face-to-face meetings, print or broadcast media, and electronic communication technologies such as the Internet. External communication includes the fields of PR, media relations, advertising, and marketing management.

According to Cheney (2004), External communication is communication that leaves the company or department. It may be with suppliers, clients, partners, or members of the public, press, or financial community. Such communication must be respectful, business-like, maintain or enhance the image the company wants to project, and may create or have to meet certain legal obligations. These restrictions tend to make it more formal in tone. External communication serves as the liaison between an organization and its publics. Organizations can strategically communicate to their audiences through public relations and advertising. This may involve an employee newsletter or video, crisis management with the news media, special events planning, building product value and communicating with stockholders, clients or donors.

2.3 Corporate image

Mackiewicz, (1993) defines corporate image as ‘the perceived sum of the entire organization, its plans and objectives. It encompasses the organization’s products services, management style, corporate communication and actions around the world. An organization exists within given, environments both internal and external, with which it has to enter constantly interact with. How the organization interacts with these environments is as important as its core business.

According to Fill (2005), the way in which organizations are presented, perceived and how they interact with their various stakeholder audiences, depends on how they use corporate

communications is done through a variety of channels; using letters, meeting, reports, phone calls, websites, advertisements and face to employed can affect the image of an organization. In the process of managing corporate image, the fundamental variables are: corporate identity, corporate communication, corporate image, and feedback. Corporate identity is the reality of the corporation—the unique, individual personality of the company that differentiates it from other companies. Corporate communication is the aggregate of sources, messages, and media by which the corporation conveys its uniqueness or brand to its various audiences. Corporate image is in the eye of the beholder—the impression of the overall corporation held by its several audiences.

2.4 Role of External Communication in Secondary Schools

Okumbe (1998), states that to achieve the desired status in the community, a school needs to communicate effectively with its external environment. As a corporate organization an ideal school should exploit, all available channels for external communication. Accordingly, the education manager should ensure that the policies and objectives of the school are clearly stipulated and well known to both the occupants and the society. The school managers do this through boards of governors, parents – teachers associations, church organizations and various community activities. The author further says that since a school is founded within a society, it is important to strengthen the school- community relations. This is important because the school draws most, if not all, of its financial and social support from the community. The image of a school is thus shaped through its interaction with its society. This comprises of how it communicates with its publics (society).

Accordingly many head teachers reflect public relations as a distortion of the truth, exaggeration and omission of facts. To many such heads, public relations are unnecessary in their schools. A schools' image is largely perceived from how its managers behave – how they speak and act; though current competition among schools has made academic performance as the reference point for positive or, negative image. If a school is performing well at national exams then its image is perceived to be positive, (The Manager, KIM 2008, September).

2.5 Critique of the Existing Literature Relevant To the Study

Grunig (1992), there have been not much academic attention to the impact of external communication on external publics or vice versa. Traditional public relations and marketing communication research mainly has focused on how organization's communication efforts influence relationships with external publics, while traditional organization communication research examined communication issues within the boundary of organizations.

Cheney (2004) criticized lack of comprehensive understanding of dynamics of communication activities and their consequences which occur in organizations. Acknowledging the lack of integrated perspective of organizational communication, the author provided a thorough review about how external and internal communication converges and how they interact each other but did not comprehensively explain how external communication affects the image of an organization. Addressing issues related to organizations' issue management and communication environment, the author argued that drawing line between external communication and internal communication is 'neither fruitful nor justifiable' and even problematic.

Not surprisingly, therefore, both the academic and professional worlds have been suggesting frameworks and models that prescribe steps towards the 'strategic' use of communications including such ideas as 'integrated marketing communications', 'corporate identity management', 'reputation management', 'stakeholder communications' and 'excellent public relations'. Much of this work has been prescriptive in suggesting frameworks for managing

communications and for managing firm-stakeholder interactions, as opposed to a more grounded and detailed understanding of the practices of branding and communications Professionals and how these may make a difference in the management of firm stakeholder relationships.

3.0 Research Methodology

Being a case study design, the research was an in-depth investigation on the influence communication has on the schools' corporate image. The study gave the researcher the opportunity to discover the relationship between the two variables: External communication and corporate image.

3.1 Target population and Sample size

The target population for this study comprised 420 members of Kitale Academy community, teaching staff, non teaching support staff and students. The target population was chosen for the research because of its availability to the researcher. The population was divided into strata. The sample size percentage was 11.6% of the target population. From the population of 420 school members, the researcher selected a sample of 47 people using the following sampling techniques to each section: 2 school administrators; the researcher used non – probabilistic purposeful sampling because the two are the only administrative managers at the school, therefore representing 100% of pop. 27 Heads of departments, teachers, and support staff were randomly selected from their various strata at a rate of 50% of their total population. 20 Students representing 5.5% of the population were selected using stratified random sampling. From 4 forms, the researcher randomly selected 5 students from each form that had 90 students the researcher picked every 18th student from the 1st one in their class registers.

Structured questionnaires were used. These structured questionnaires included open questions and closed questions. The questionnaire was distributed by the researcher to all 47 respondents to fill them.

4.0 Research Findings and Discussions

4.1.1 Age of respondents.

The results from the findings showed that 90 % of the students are aged between 15 – 18 years and are able to communicate given their prime teenage age. The findings also indicated that 62.9% of respondents who are administrators, heads of departments, teachers or support staff are aged between 31 – 40. This is a dynamic age bracket when most of workers are developing in their careers and therefore communicate in their official capacities.

4.1.2 Gender of Respondents.

From the findings, it was evident that 87.23% respondents were female. This is because the school is a girls' only school and only 12.77% of respondents were male.

4.1.3 Level of Education:

The results of the findings indicate that 40.74% of the respondents have college level of education, 59.25% have university level of education and none of the respondents has secondary level of education except for the students who are still attending school. This meant that the respondents have a reasonable level of education to enable them communicate.

4.1.4 External communication channels used to reach target audience

The study established that word of mouth was the channel that was very frequently used by 30% of the students and 25.92% of administrators, heads of departments, teachers and support staff. Telephone was very frequently used by 44.45% of administrators, heads of departments, teachers and support staff. It therefore indicates that person to person communication, through the use of word of mouth is important for the school in reaching its target audience, while use of telephone is common because it is the most convenient and available channel of the school communicating with external audience given the easy access to mobile telephony in Kenya .

4.1.5 The influence of external communication on the image of secondary schools

The study findings indicate that there was a strong relationship between feedback to external communication and the image of school, 36.19% of all the respondents said that feedback they get from their target audience strongly affects the image of their school. A significant 31.91 % of the respondents felt that feedback affects the image of the school. It is important for secondary schools to communicate effectively so that they can get positive feedback that will play a major role that will positively enhance the corporate image of the schools.

4.1.6 secondary schools perception of their corporate image

The findings indicated that 23.40% of the respondents saw their schools cooperate image as very positive, with 74.46% seeing the cooperate image as positive. Such perception therefore describes the school's image as positive as perceived by the school itself. A school that perceives itself as having positive image is likely to excel in attaining its educational objectives.

4.1.7 Communication Concepts Negatively Affecting Cooperate Image Of Secondary School.

From the results of the findings, 34.04% of the respondents said that channels of communication used by the school strongly affect the school corporate image, 29.78% of the respondents said the way of message is communicated by the school to reach its target audience strongly affects the cooperate image of the school and a similar 29.78% of respondents said feedback from the target audience was a concept that strongly affects the corporate image of the school.

4.1.8 Need for Public relation Policy in Secondary Schools:

All the respondents, 100% indicated that there is need for public relations policy in secondary schools. This will enhance the school's relationship with the external audience so as to sustain the public good will it gets.

5.0 Conclusion.

The result of this study concluded that external communication does exist between secondary schools and their target audience. For instance the target audience for both students and the school staff included publics such as parents, former students, and members of public and other audiences.

The researcher concluded that channels of communication favored by the school were use of word of mouth, letters and circulars, telephone, and face to face meetings. Therefore there is need for the schools to enhance the use of such channels and professionally train their personnel on how to effectively use such channels to enhance the image of secondary schools.

From the study, the researcher concluded that secondary schools perceive their cooperate image as positive. This shows that the secondary schools are aware of their rating by their external audience, especially as a result of how the schools communicate with such audience. There was also a strong indication that feedback obtained by the school o significantly affects the cooperate image of a school and therefore there is need for secondary schools to have a

public relations policy so as to manage communication so as to receive positive feedback from their audience.

The researcher concluded that are Communication concepts that negatively affect the image of the school. Such include the way the message is communicated, feedback from the target audience and channels of communication. If professionally handled, the said concepts can be utilized so as to positively influence the cooperate image of the school.

Regarding external communication, the researcher felt that External communication is communication with target groups and interested parties outside the organization, locally, nationally and internationally. Using this communication, schools project a distinctive image and its work and raise its profile. Training of staff and students on matters of image concepts is an important part of this external communication work. As far as possible, external communication should be preceded by internal communication and consensus.

All members of the school should contribute towards the perception of the school as a competitive learning institution which is strong in the areas of education and co curricular. Help foster confidence in school members; work and develop cooperation and good relations with our surroundings.

The researcher further concludes that in the process of managing corporate image, the fundamental variables are: corporate identity, corporate communication, corporate image, and feedback. Corporate identity is the reality of the corporation-the unique, individual personality of the company that differentiates it from other companies. Of sources, messages, and media by which the corporation conveys its uniqueness or brand to its various audiences. Corporate image is in the eye of the beholder-the impression of the overall corporation held by its several audiences. The objective in managing corporate image is to communicate the company's identity to those audiences or constituencies that are important to the firm, in such a way that they develop and maintain a favorable view of the company. Therefore school managers should be aware of the effects of any form of communications that emanate from their schools.

5.1 Recommendations.

After analyzing the data and giving a comprehensive conclusion, the researcher felt that the following needs to be done by secondary schools in order to enhance their corporate image. There is need for secondary schools to consciously put in place a public relations policy so as to interact positively with their external audience. The schools management should ensure that all members are sensitized about the need for a corporate image for the school.

All channels of external communication need to be audited so as to enhance the quality of the messages sent out of school and how such messages are conveyed to the external audience.

Such an audit is important in that the quality of communication will ensure that feedback obtained will be positive and therefore positively affect the corporate image of the school.

There is need for the secondary schools to have training programmes for their members on how to handle public relations. This can be done through workshops and seminars, whereby members will be taught skills such as letter writing, conducting meetings, public speaking, personal grooming and etiquette among others.

Finally, the school needs to have an official public relations officer; who preferably should be an administrator; to handle critical issues that affect the schools' corporate image.

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