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**The Role of Public Relations in the Management of
Hospitals in Kenya. A Critical Literature Review**

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The University Of Nairobi, School Of Public Relations And
Communications

Abstract

Purpose: The main objective of this study is to examine the role public relations plays in the management of hospitals in Kenya. Public relations are a crucial management function. Health organizations are in constant contact with various publics. They therefore require a comprehensive and well-integrated public relations strategy to reach out to these publics.

Methodology: The paper used a desk study review methodology where relevant empirical literature review was reviewed to identify main themes and to extract knowledge gaps.

Findings: the role of public relations is not well defined. Even though the hospitals are engaged in numerous Public Relation activities, there is a lack of a Public Relation department to adequately handle the activities. Public relation is therefore disorganized and haphazardly approached. Hospitals lack a Public Relation plan and policy.

Unique Contribution to Theory and Practice: There is an urgent need for hospitals in Kenya to establish a Public Relation and Communications department. The department should be staffed with professional Public Relation personnel to handle Public Relation matters at the hospital

Keywords: *Organization, management, hospital, public relations*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Public relations are a crucial management function. As a distinctive management function, it helps in establishing and maintaining mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its various publics (Grunig, 2020). PR is about influencing public opinion in order for an organization to gain a favorable image in the eyes of the public. To achieve this, an organization should have a well-organized public relations strategy. A well thought out and planned PR strategy will go a long way in making the organization more understood by its publics and for the organization to understand its publics. Public relations will conceive themes and organizations, advice the management, deal with conflicts, survey attitudes, and promote good employer-employee relations (Elendu, 2018).

Public relations are compounded of the social sciences, which teaches how individuals and groups react, and the science of communications, which provides the means of resolving conflicts and establishing contact and mutual understanding. It encompasses all forms of communication that an organization uses to win the goodwill, support, confidence and trust of its publics (Doorley, 2015). Grunig (2020) indicates that PR practitioners once operated at the lowest management levels in many organizations. Over the years, this has changed and today, a wise company puts a PR Professional right in the inner circle of the management. The Public Relations Officer (PRO) or Corporate Communications Director reports directly to the top management. He/ she is at first tier management where he/ she will know what the management thought is in public issues. On the other hand, the PR practitioner is expected to keep tabs on what the public is thinking and their attitude towards the organization, its services and products. By gauging the public's attitude, he/she will be in a position to make decisions and strategize on how to react to them. Whatever he/she discovers is passed on to the management for appropriate action to be taken. The basic ingredients required for an organization's existence and success includes public support, trust, goodwill and confidence. It is the duty of the PR department to devise strategies of communicating to the diverse publics of an organization (Smith, 2020). These publics are divided into two: internal (employees) and external (clients, neighbors, media, government, stock holders. The needs and expectations of these publics are always changing. It is the responsibility of the PR department to carry out research to discover what the publics' requirements are at a particular time and act swiftly to fill in the gap as expected by the public.

Health organizations are in constant contact with various publics: the government, the community at large, suppliers, clients, patients and their visitors, mass media, neighbors, and employees (Boris, 2015). They therefore require a comprehensive and well-integrated public relations strategy to reach out to these publics. PR, when planned strategically and executed well can add value to a health organization by helping it better employ people, which would provide a good return to shareholders and deliver products and service value to customers.

Health organizations, though classified as social services providers rather than strictly business entities, have a responsibility of fostering health consciousness through health education by providing opportunities for participation of people in the health organizations. This, according to Leigh-Hunt (2017) makes health institutions not to be considered in isolation from other socio-economic factors. Health service providers work directly with the community and hence provide

a direct service to people at the grassroots level. Health providers utilize community resources and should encourage community participation in self-help organizations at local level.

Health organizations in the developed world long recognized the importance of public relations as an important management function (Doorley, 2015). In Kenya, the Ministry of Health headquarters has a PR department and so are hospitals like Kenyatta National Hospital, Nairobi Hospital, Agha Khan Hospital, Mater Hospital, and health services providers like KEMSA, NHIF, and AAR among many others. A hospital's public relations department deals with medical staff, employees, volunteers, its patients, visitors, management board, the media, government agencies and the community (Shen, 2020). The department evaluates the attitudes of these different groups through research and develops a communication strategy to help each of them understand the hospital.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Majority of hospitals in Kenya have developed from small medical clinics into large, tertiary and even teaching and referral hospitals. They now serve not only the local community but the entire Kenyan community and the surrounding countries. On the contrary, according to research, the health sector industry has had a high employee turnover in the recent years due to reasons such as lack of proper employee communication strategy. Customer dissatisfaction is rampant with patients and visitors complaining of unexplained delays and long queues. Hospitals are therefore losing out on customer satisfaction and retention.

In view of the pivotal role played by Public Relations in the success of an organization, it is the intention of this study to find out the role played by communication and public relations in the effective management of hospitals in Kenya.

1.3 Objective of the study

The main objective of this study is to examine the role public relations plays in the management of hospitals in Kenya.

1.4 Significance of the study

The findings from this study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on public relations management function in the health sector. It will also provide information to the management of hospitals and other health organizations the core tools of public relations management which includes: planning, coordinating, directing, budgeting, monitoring and evaluation to ensure that the organizations will achieve their goals in a cost-effective way. Little has been written about public relations in Kenya. It is therefore imperative a study like this be carried out to pave way for further research.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Public Relations activities

According to Doorley (2017) public relations is a management function that creates, develops and carries out policies and programs to influence public opinion or public reaction about an idea, a product or an organization. PR keeps management informed of changes in the opinion of groups

whose support is needed: employees, shareholders, customers, suppliers, dealers, the community at large and the government.

Kelly (2020) lists the following as some of the activities and functions of public relations. Firstly, counselling; public relation practitioners offer routine advice to an organization's management concerning policies, relationships and communication with its various publics. Tambe (2019) says that when a policy decision has been made, managers must understand and agree that it should be implemented, then it is passed to the employees and when need arises, other publics are made aware. This is the work of public relations. Second activity is employee communication. Sveningsson (2020) indicates that to promote positive external public relations, an organization must have a sound internal public relation. A satisfied and enthusiastic employee is an extremely effective and credible PR person. Employees want to know the direction the organization is headed, why it is heading that way and the role they have to play towards that particular direction. Lastly, Baran identifies media relations as another activity under public relations. media outlets have increased and so are advances in media technology. This makes them more complex to deal with. PR helps management to understand various media, preparation and organization of materials for them and in placing those material.

Other activities of public relations include representation of the company at trade association meetings, commissioning and maintaining forms of corporate identity and logos and organizing public relations exhibitions and displays among others (Cheney, 2017) All these activities and more have to be fitted into a planned PR program and conducted within an agreed budget.

2.2 Public relations as a management function

As management in many companies, big or small, as well as the Government embraces the interactive nature and value of Public Relations (PR), it must be noted that success is seldom accidental. PR helps craft strategic plans that contribute to efficiency, profitability and overall success of whoever uses this management tool effectively (Stoldt, 2020). Grunig (2020) asserts that public relations practitioner is a part of management function of the organization he is associated. There is an intimate relationship between public relations and the success of the organization's goals and mission. As a member of the organization team, the public relations practitioner's role is to measure, evaluate and interpret the attitudes of various relevant publics, assist the management in defining objectives for increasing public understanding and acceptance of the organization's products and services, equate objectives with interests, needs and goals and develop, execute and evaluate a program to earn public understanding and acceptance.

There is a public relations angle to every aspect of management. PR is a distinctive management function that helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its publics. (Umaru, 2022) It is a foregone conclusion that the management of an organization needs to be aware of values and attitudes of its various publics for the organization to achieve its goals. Public relations as a management function will encompass anticipating, analyzing and interpreting public opinion, attitudes and issues that might impact on the organization, for good or for bad.

Fernandez (2017) states that management of organizations need to understand the attitudes and values of their publics to achieve institutional goals. A public relations practitioner will act as a

mediator, helping to translate private aims into reasonable, publicly acceptable policy and action. According to Ginter (2017) public relations as a management function anticipates, analyzes and interprets issues that might impact the operations and plans of the organization. Public relations researches to find out who the organization's publics are, what they want and how they want it.

The role of the public relations member of the management team is that of innovator, catalyst, conscience and the inward and outward "seeing eye" (Baker, 2020) This "seeing eye" means that there has to be someone at a senior level in the management team who should be keeping a constant watch on the effects of company policies on the outside world. Equally important is the necessity to monitor the climate within and without the organization.

Baker (2020) says that the management team has a corporate responsibility, but special tasks or responsibilities are normally assigned by the managing director to the various members of his team. Production, sales, and financial control are essential parts of management, but public relations tend to flow over the whole gamut of business and management. In theory, Black says that each director is capable of handling elements of PR applicable to his specialized field. This is however unlikely true in practice. It is more efficient to leave public relations to the professional expert, thus permitting the other directors to concentrate on their own spheres of work.

Baker (2020) says that a company cannot decide whether or not it will have public relations since it is omnipresent and ubiquitous, but it is desirable to take all necessary steps to achieve "good" public relations throughout the company's organization and activities. It should be noted that public relations have had a nebulous definition. It has suffered from being misunderstood with other closely related functions like advertising, marketing, and propaganda. It would only serve right if public relations are distinguished from these other functions.

Batra (2016) defines advertising as the 'art of presenting the most persuasive possible selling message to the right prospects for the product or service at the lowest possible cost.' While PR relates to all the communications of the total organization, advertising is mainly limited to the marketing function. Marketing has the task of seeking and stimulating buyers for a firm's outputs, be they goods or services. Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) defines marketing as 'the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably', (Jessy 2016). Propaganda, on the other hand is the means of achieving and gaining support for an opinion, creed or belief. Propaganda lacks credibility and is liable to invite suspicion or disagreement, qualities that PR cannot afford to have.

2.3 Role and place of public relations in the health organizations in Kenya

Elrod (2018) indicates that there is a lot of competition in health care provision. For a hospital to succeed in its objectives and plans, it has to be properly "positioned" through PR efforts. These efforts will include educating hospital publics through such services as "open houses" that demonstrate and explain services, sponsorship of health and medical events and seminars. The hospital can also distribute health related information through newspaper columns, radio spot announcements, TV interviews and telephone hot lines. A hospital can also increase its community interaction and improve its relation with the community which is a key aspect in hospital PR.

Not much has been written on public relations on health organizations in Kenya, unlike in the West where PR long became an essential management tool of health management. One can say that PR has not been given its rightful place in many health organizations in Kenya. At the Ministry of Health, there exists a skeleton staff that handles PR issues. The department is poorly established, lacks a resource center and many of its activities are haphazard. Much of the Ministry of health communication issues are handled by different departments that are associated with the ministry like NASCOP, NACC, ACU, KEMRI, CDC among others.

Health organizations like Mater Hospital, NHIF, Kenyatta National Hospital, Agha Khan Hospital, KEMSA and AAR have established departments that handle PR issues. At Mater Hospital for example PR has been handled by Customer Service Department since 2001. It was only in 2006 that the Hospital established a PR department. This department, according to the Public Relations Manager (PRM) is inadequately staffed and has very little budget to carry out its activities. It would appear that the management of the hospital is yet to appreciate the full role of PR, “PR has not been accorded the place it deserves,” says the PRM.

It is a little different at AAR where the PR department is well established, well-staffed and has a fairly good budget to carry out its activities. The PRM reports directly to the Chief Executive Officer and sits in management meetings. As part of public relations activities, health organizations in Kenya stage events that are also captured by the local media. These includes Mater Heart Run (Mater Hospital), Heart to Heart Run (Karen Hospital), Medical Train (Avenue Health Care), cleft lip operations (Kenyatta National hospital) etc.

2.4 Empirical review

Chepkemioi (2021) conducted a study on the use of social media for public relations practices in Kenya. The objectives of the study were, to find out various public relations practices in higher learning institution, to examine which social media platforms are used in the institutions, to analyze what social media is used for in public relations practice in higher learning institution. The research design used is descriptive method, which employs both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Data was collected by conducting interview and through questionnaires to various respondents. Questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data while qualitative data were collected by conducting interviews and through focus group discussion. The results of the study showed that PR practices mainly focused on building and sustaining strong relationship with the publics. Public relations practitioners play an essential role in cultivation of beneficial relationship between an institution and the publics. Through public relations function, an organization develops policies and strategies putting into consideration public interests. This study established that use of social media for public relations activities plays a major role in the institution; in their position public relations practitioners evaluate external and internal opinions, attitude and needs; respond to queries from the publics, respond to inaccurate posts in social media and advise institution’s management regarding a crisis or an issue hence influencing decision making and policy implementation. The challenge with the use of social media was that message can be misinterpreted by online users.

Akuku (2014), conducted a study on the role of public relations in enhancing external customer satisfaction: a study of the Nairobi city county government (NCCG) The main objective of this

research is to test if there is a correlation between Public Relations and customer satisfaction. A sample of 400 residents will be drawn from the Nairobi County population of 3,138,369 (2009 Census). This paper will use qualitative and quantitative methods of research. Different sampling methods will be used to explore how the County Government relates to its publics and the impact it has on this relationship. Data for this study will be obtained from the Nairobi City County offices and different areas within the County. Questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions are some of the data collecting methods to be used. The results of the study showed that communication efforts of the Nairobi City County Government are wanting as communication is usually done through friends, print media, TV, social media and bloggers.

Chege (2014), conducted a study on the role of public relations in improving the image of Kenya's national assembly. The distinction between the broad and narrow senses of publicity is important in today's rapidly changing communication environment where practitioners use a combination of public media and direct communication vehicles to reach publics. The study employed descriptive statistics to collect data through questionnaires from the respondents where 61 respondents were interviewed. Random sampling technique was used to randomly select members of the public from Nairobi County. The data collected was entered, coded and analyzed using SPSS. The results of the study showed that public relations play a significant role in improving trust with the institution. besides, public relations also play a significant role in improving effectiveness of the organizational relationships, focusing on the long-term goals of an institution, improving commitment and satisfaction and building institutional relationships.

2.5 Research gaps

A knowledge gap exists when desired research findings provide a different perspective to the matter being discussed. For example, Chege (2014), conducted a study on the role of public relations in improving the image of Kenya's national assembly. The study employed descriptive statistics to collect data through questionnaires from the respondents where 61 respondents were interviewed. Random sampling technique was used to randomly select members of the public from Nairobi County. The data collected was entered, coded and analyzed using SPSS. The results of the study showed that public relations play a significant role in improving trust with the institution. besides, public relations also play a significant role in improving effectiveness of the organizational relationships, focusing on the long-term goals of an institution, improving commitment and satisfaction and building institutional relationships. On the other hand, our study focused on the role of public relations in the management of hospitals in Kenya.

In addition to that, a methodological gap can be identified whereby Chege (2014) employed a descriptive research design to conduct a study the role of public relations in improving the image of Kenya's national assembly. The results of the study showed that public relations play a significant role in improving trust with the institution. besides, public relations also play a significant role in improving effectiveness of the organizational relationships, focusing on the long-term goals of an institution, improving commitment and satisfaction and building institutional relationships. Our current study on the role of public relations in the management of hospitals in Kenya adopted a desktop study review methodology where relevant empirical literature was reviewed to identify the main themes of the study.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a desktop literature review method (desk study). This involved in-depth review of studies related to the role of public relations in the management of hospitals in Kenya. Three sorting stages were implemented on the subject under the study in order to determine the viability of the subject for research. This is the first stage that comprised of the initial identification of all articles that were based on the role of public relations in the management of hospitals in Kenya the search was done generally by searching the articles in the article title, abstract, and keywords. A second search involved fully available publications on the subject of the role of public relations in the management of hospitals in Kenya. The third step involved selection of fully accessible publications. Reduction of the literature to only fully accessible publications yielded specificity and allowed the researcher to focus on the articles that related to the role of public relations in the management of hospitals in Kenya. After an in-depth search into the keywords (Organization, management, hospital, public relations), the researcher arrived at 3 articles that were suitable for analysis.

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4.0 SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to examine the role of public relations in the management of hospitals in Kenya. From the findings, it turns out that the role of public relations is not well defined. Even though the hospitals are engaged in numerous PR activities, there is a lack of a PR department to adequately handle the activities. Without professional PR personnel at the hospitals, the task of handling PR is left in the hands of individual managers responsible for the activities.

PR is therefore disorganized and haphazardly approached. Hospitals lack a PR plan and policy. Thus planning, coordination, monitoring and evaluation of PR activities are poorly done.

Without an established tool for monitoring and evaluation, the success of a PR activity is gauged by the number of complaints arising out of the activity. There are no specific goals for PR activities therefore the success of the activities cannot be measured for lack of benchmarks to refer to. Public relations play an important role in the management of hospitals only that it is not well defined as a strategic management tool.

4.2 Recommendations

There is an urgent need for hospitals in Kenya to establish a PR and Communications department. The department should be staffed with professional PR personnel to handle PR matters at the hospital. The department thus established will be headed by a Public Relations and Communications Director who will sit in management meetings and report directly to the Executive Director. The person will be the link between the organization and its various publics and will come up with a PR policy document to guide all PR activities at the organization. The department will carry out regular research among the hospital's publics to determine the needs of these publics. It will also set up proper communication techniques for the success of the hospital's PR and communications campaigns. The department will be responsible for protecting and improving the hospital's image, identify PR challenges and look for opportunities that will create a niche for the hospital for the success of the organization. The department will plan, coordinate, direct, budget, monitor and evaluate all PR activities. These activities will have set objectives that tally with the hospital's vision and objectives.

This study should be replicated in government and private hospitals to examine the role PR plays in the management of the hospitals in Kenya. Research should be carried out to include a wider population using different instruments. For example, in-patients should be included in further research since they are assumed to spend more time in the hospital.

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