

PUBLIC RELATIONS CONSULTING IN THE EMERGING AFRICA: CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

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INTRODUCTION

It is often said that the world has become a global village. Owing largely to the enormous strides in technology and telecommunication, occurrences in the remotest parts of the earth have instant and profound effects on the rest of the world. A ready example is the Tsunami disaster in Indonesia. People will easily recall a time when such news would have probably remained within South East Asia, barely making an impact in Europe not to talk of Africa. Now, even my then six-year-old son, along with his school mates, raised money for the victims of the Tsunami. Such is the power of modern technology and telecommunication.

Perhaps the continent that this widening of the information reach has had the most profound effect on is Africa. Initially described as the Dark Continent because very little was known about it, Africa has for a long time been and is still evolving as the continent of reckon in the scheme of world politics.

At the recently concluded G8 Summit in Heilingendamm, Germany, Africa was again described as "the continent of the future", hence the summit declaration – "Growth and Responsibility in Africa". The G8 renewed their commitment to considerably increase their official development assistance (ODA) to Africa by 2010 by \$25 billion each year, thus increasing each member's total ODA to \$50 billion a year by 2010. They also agreed to provide an additional \$60 billion a year for the next few years to support prevention programmes for HIV/AIDS, Malaria, and Tuberculosis and strengthen healthcare systems in Africa's least developed countries. Germany alone has pledged €4 million to Africa by 2015.



Closer home, Uganda is a priority country in bilateral development cooperation. Germany, for instance, is promoting Uganda's switch from an agro-based to an industrialized economy. Uganda was also the first African country to enjoy debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative.

HOW DOES THIS AFFECT US AS PUBLIC RELATIONS CONSULTANTS?

To whom much is given, much is expected. All this aid does not come for free. Besides the obvious advantages to industrialized nations in terms of global trade and liberal foreign policies, the G8, for example, believes that a vigorous impetus is necessary to ensure that Africa achieves the Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) by 2015. In addition, there is the age-long concern about whether the money is being spent on the right projects.

As African image-makers and image-managers, we face the challenges of various negative perceptions caused by incessant civil strife, poverty, disease, sit-tight rulership and corruption. Sit-tight rulership and corruption, in particular, are responsible for the inability of many Africa nations to access the much needed funds for development. Back home, we face the challenges of barriers to African unity, some of which have been identified, based on observations from reports by NEPAD, to include:

- Lack of infrastructure
- Lack of access to funds
- A profound, mutual ignorance of all 53 countries and their cultures
- Language barriers (South Africa alone has eleven official languages; Nigeria has well over 390 dialects; few (if any) of which are widely spoken by any of her immediate neighbours)
- The issue of differential economics

HOW CAN WE OVERCOME THESE CHALLENGES AND PERFORM OUR ROLES AS PUBLIC RELATIONS CONSULTANTS CREDITABLY?

We are at the brink of what I like to think of as the "Emerging Africa". The Emerging Africa is one consciously striving to take pride of place on the world stage; an Africa conscious of its past and ready, to effect necessary changes to move it ahead; an Africa where democracy, as a



form of globally accepted governance, is slowly but gradually taking root; an Africa that is learning to eschew violence and embrace peace; an Africa that has realized there can be no real political independence without economic independence; an Africa that realizes that it is no longer sufficient to be self-accountable; we must be accountable not just to ourselves but to the whole world.

Yes, we still have a long way to go, but the Emerging Africa is well on the way.

Now, how does this prophesy affect us as consulting practitioners of public relations? The private sector has often been described as the engine room of growth in any economy. The role of government is to create the enabling environment. Most of the investments coming into Africa are private sector-driven. Furthermore, governments across Africa are striving to become leaner and more efficient in their operations. This has led to mass retrenchments across board. In addition to this, many public enterprises are being privatized, thus leading to further loss of jobs and income. The key drivers of the Emerging Africa are going to demand a lot more from you and me.

The key challenge, of course, is for the drivers of the Emerging Africa to communicate with and to; first, to the growing population of 800 million Africans across the continent; and, second, the teeming investors in Africa and the whole world at large. Still functioning in my role as a prophet, I prophesy that there will be the tendency for the drivers to outsource certain functions which will include public relations, especially if it has to be driven at a relatively advanced stage.

There will be the need for a collective approach to rolling out goods and services across Africa. The desire will be for one-stop organizations that can walk with them through Africa. Believe me it will not be the public sector practitioner but the lot will fall on the public relations consultants.

This then offers a good opportunity to discuss the present state of public relations consultancy in Africa. A random sample taken across some nations on the continent, shows that there are more practitioners in public and private sector employment, than those running consultancies. Furthermore, a vast number of the consultancies are more or less one-man businesses that



have been formed after retirement or on the impromptu back of job losses. Therefore they usually lack the energy that such a venture requires to thrive or adequate planning and resources. This makes some of them already DOA (dead on arrival).

Let me hasten to say that I understand the desire for us to want to stay in the relative or perceived security of our salaried jobs as against the vagaries of self-employment; lest I be accused of condescension. It is never easy to leave the “known for the unknown”.

But did I just hear someone say "nothing ventured, nothing gained"? Only those who are willing to leave the shores will discover new lands. The quantum of your returns is most times directly proportional to the level of risk you undertake. If I ask how many of us wish to be multi-millionaires and indeed billionaires, I am sure most hands will go up. However, if I should enumerate the risks involved, I may not get those many hands up!

This may be a good time for some of us to switch off and stop listening to my monologue. However to the bold and courageous who may wish to take their destiny into their own hands, I invite you to please come along.

Let me start by acquainting you with the level of practice in public relations consultancies across the globe.

Public relations is a pro-cyclical industry, which means that its revenue growth is positively correlated with overall macroeconomic performance. The industry has increasingly outpaced GDP growth. The reasons for this stunning growth relates to new corporate positioning and branding needs from the advent of new technologies, products and services. The arrival of the Internet on a mass scale as well as developments in wireless technology and telephony were some of the big ticket items that sparked an extraordinary wave of marketing.

Evidence of substitution away from advertising spending in favour of public relations is also apparent from the historical record as the growth of public relations spending significantly outstripped the growth of advertising spending by nearly twice in the second half of the 1990s. The same set of factors influenced the two industries. But the growing importance of



transparency and disclosure may have played a critical role in relatively strengthening public relations spending versus advertising spending. The growing relevance of credible communications and the ability to create best teams of public relations and advertising consultants as well as having a closer relation to the top management at client headquarters, are some other reasons why public relations has grown in stature relative to advertising.

Globally, new competition for public relations firms is emerging as the industry may find new entrants into its increasingly appetizing arena. There are a lot of new entrants that are vying to enter the growing and profitable communications domain. The list includes management consultants and even blue blood investment banks such as, KPMG Consulting, Accenture, PWC, E&Y/Cap Gemini, Deloitte Touche, McKinsey, Viant, IBM, Scient, Sapien, Booz, Allen, Hamilton, First Boston Consulting and many more. As a first approximation, some may say the difference between public relations and management consultants is the same as that between tactics and strategy. Public relations brings execution excellence to the arena of communications. Management consultants bring strategic knowledge and depth of sector insight. Here the roles between public relations and management consultants are reversed relative to advertising and public relations.

It is believed, therefore, that if public relations firms in Africa are to remain deeply wedded to a thriving and highly competitive communications business, public relations should evolve into a mix of tactical excellence

and strategic thinking – more like management consultants. The more one knows about one's client, the stronger the likelihood that that consultant (i.e., that public relations professional) will be able to add value to the relationship. And, ultimately, that's what it is all about.

If we know all this, why then has public relations consultancy practice remained at a rudimentary level in Africa? Some of the reasons I can immediately think of are briefly discussed below.

Low level of Education

Education has been the bane of development in Africa. Statistics show that most African nations sit at the bottom of educationally advanced nations in the world. The direct



implication of this is that the knowledge base of Africans is very low, promoting a high degree of ignorance and, as expected, wherever there is ignorance there must be poverty. This poverty has forced most Africans to accept their lot in life with little or no effort at improving it. There is little or no effort to carry them along in the scheme of things and we ourselves do not insist on being carried along.

There are large differences between and within countries. About 70 per cent of adult men and 50 per cent of women are literate. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is above 90 per cent in about half of the countries, but is below 60 per cent in five countries. From our interview and research with communication professionals in Africa, we found wide variations in professional and vocational education in PR and communications. In Tanzania, for instance, more universities now offer a PR qualification while some other countries offer Mass Communication with the option to specialize in PR at a certain level of their programme. The need for trained or trainable local PR people arises as a result of the complexities of language, cultures and media structure.

Poor Response to Issues of Governance

Closely related to the above is our inability to hold our governments and corporate institutions accountable for their actions. For a myriad of reasons, in most parts of Africa, governments and corporations literally get away with murder. Generally, Africans are not extremely vocal about their rights and this has not promoted the need for improved communication across the continent when it comes to critical issues affecting welfare.

Poor Appreciation of Public Relations across the Board as a Management Science

Most governments and corporations are yet to appreciate fully the role of public relations in the scheme of things. Most do not even have a proper understanding of its benefits. At best, our profession is mistaken for media practice, advertising, marketing, sales and any other thing you can think of. Worse still, in some minds, we are no better than protocol officers to arrange parties for the boss or mere deliverers of illicit gratification also known as bribe.

Inability of Practitioners to Justify Their Contribution to the Bottom-Line

The point above is further buttressed by our inability or let me say, difficulty in justifying our



contribution to the bottom-line. We are yet to fully inculcate the practice of evaluation as a vital aspect of our services which should be carried out at set intervals or the end of the campaign to determine the level of success and effect it had on the stakeholders. And judging from what they say, what cannot be measured cannot be valued.

Poor Integration of Global Consultancies and Practices in Africa

Most global public relations consultancies have yet to show sufficient interest in doing business in Africa. This is in contrast to what obtains with the advertising networks. While the Republic of South Africa may boast of a number of global affiliations with local consultancies, the same cannot be said of other parts of Africa. Perhaps the case may only be slightly better in Kenya and Nigeria. Recent reports by the International Communications Consultancies Organization (ICCO) have shown that international assignments will generate new revenues in 2007. It shows further that almost all the participating countries predicted that the level of fees generated from international projects will increase in 2007; the average predicted increase was a very healthy 25 per cent.

The Inability of Practitioners to See the Consultancy More as a Business than Just a Profession

Most practitioners in Africa are more concerned about the professional aspect rather than the business aspect. This mindset has made us take decisions that are more emotional than business driven. Little wonder that a lot of our consultancies have failed to thrive the way we desire.

Resistance from Internal Public Relations Practitioners

We continually experience strong resistance from our in-house counterparts who see us as threats to their jobs especially in small- and medium-scale organizations. This is largely because most public relations firms in Africa are reactive rather than being proactive. According to reports, this is also a global issue; the growth of in-house departments has emerged for the first time as a check on growth.

Lack of Buoyant Economies and Big Businesses in Africa

Most economies in Africa may not support the establishment of frontline public relations



consultancies in Africa. In most markets, there is very keen competition for the few “juicy” public relations accounts that exist. Once taken, there supposedly is not much left for the rest. It is believed that certain geographic region such as Asia (China, Hong Kong, Singapore), Middle East (Dubai) Central and Eastern Europe would become global PR hubs.

Lack of Resources and Infrastructure

In most markets, the infrastructure to set up a leading public relations practice is lacking or the resources to obtain them are. In effect, this has produced a large number of briefcase public relations consultants who I have absolutely no problems with as long as they act professionally enough not to embarrass the real practitioner. Unfortunately, this has not largely been the case.

Lack of Foresight on the Part of Practitioners

More often than not, public relations practitioners, especially consultants, have failed to position themselves in vantage positions to take full advantage of changes in the economy. Most of the time, we are more reactive than proactive in our practice. The Good Book says; "where carcass is, is where the vultures are gathered". We must be where the action is.

So, What Public Relations Consultancy Opportunities Exist in the Emerging Africa?

Quite a number, I dare say.

As earlier stated, Africa is gradually but steadily becoming the pride of investment, especially from the Far East. With the tremendous growth of economies such as that of China and Japan, there is the aggressive move to invest overseas, and Africa provides just the answer to this quest. It is, therefore, anticipated that the continent will witness a massive inflow of foreign capital. The continent will attract major businesses, brands and services around the globe, thus making the entire system a lot more competitive. Needless to say all these will provide tremendous communication opportunities of which public relations consultancies can play a vital role.

Furthermore, as democracy develops in Africa, the knowledge base of those on the continent continues to increase. It is getting increasingly difficult for nations and corporations to ride roughshod on their citizens and customers. There is the demand for greater accountability and responsibility. Corporations, especially those who are defying this rule are finding themselves



on the receiving end of lawsuits and civil action not just in Africa but in the world at large. The case of Shell Petroleum and the Ogoni issue in Nigeria readily comes to mind.

In the same vein, many nations are desirous of positioning or repositioning themselves in the eyes of the world. Our international channels are saturated with commercials of various nations selling their investment and tourism potentials. Again, this provides wonderful opportunities for African consultancy practitioners. After all, nobody should be able to tell stories of Africans better than we Africans. We must position ourselves in the centre of these re-branding efforts in order to take full advantage of it.

Still on opportunities, there is the desire for African nations continentally and regionally to speak with one voice. Initiatives such as NEPAD have supported this vision. We also have the move towards a common currency in regions such as West Africa. Again, the prospects for public relations consultancies are quite huge as the communication requirements of such projects cannot easily be quantified.

Having painted such a rosy picture, the question to now ask is, how can public relations consultancies take advantage of the pending windfall?

I have tried to proffer some answers:

1. Public relations consultancies must be highly knowledgeable and multi-skilled to stay ahead of their environment and clients
2. As consultants, I we must fully understand the dynamics of our business with the initial objective of adding value but the ultimate goal of making profit.
3. We must improve our level of stakeholders' appreciation and respectability. We are consultants in our right and not just errand boys or mere agents. We must seek recognition at all levels of interaction.
4. We must be ready to think big! Cut out the small picture, as you do not need it.
5. We must engage global practices through training, alignment and affiliations.
6. We must build truly African Public Relations Consultancy networks.
7. We must start building competencies in areas of specializations, i.e., Aviation PR, Tourism PR, Health PR, Financial PR, Corporate Social Responsibility, and so on.
8. We must remain committed to the vision of building strong consultancies come what



may.

Let us take this business to the next level.

Welcome to the Golden Age of Public Relations Consultancy!

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