CORPORATE COMMUNICATION VERSUS STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION: THE PERCEPTION OF PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS IN CROSS RIVER STATE

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Abstract

This paper aims at assessing how Public Relations practitioners in Cross River State of Nigeria perceive the difference between corporate and strategic communications. Being a research on perception, the argument method was used to identify and compare the respondents' understanding of the subject matter. The instrument adopted for the study was focus group discussion, and 20 respondents were picked through systematic sampling from amongst members of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations, Cross River State Chapter. The theoretical framework was anchored on the Situational Theory of Publics, as developed by James Grunig in 1968. Data collected were qualitatively analysed. From the findings, it was established that there is a marked difference between corporate and strategic communications. It was thereafter recommended, among others, that PR practitioners who desire to contribute to the attainment of their organisational goals, should embrace strategic communication in order to achieve maximum impact.

Keywords: communication, corporate communication, public relations, perception, strategic communication.

1.   Introduction

The world is constantly changing and so are the ways people do things. Man is, by nature, a gregarious animal, and this gregariousness requires that man should socialise with others in order to survive and succeed in life. One major inevitable instrument needed in this activity of socialisation is communication. Without it, man and the organisation he represents are useless – unproductive, unsuccessful, inactive, and ultimately, headed for extinction. The

indispensability of communication among human beings is aptly captured by Beryl Williams (1977) when he graphically expressed:

> From the time we wake in the morning we get through to the wife, children, milkman, bus conductor, boss, secretary, sales assistant and many others. Each day we are involved in conversations, discussion, giving and receiving concern, tenderness or even annoyance (p.7).

This personal interaction is called communication; and it is very essential in guiding human relationships. Therefore, knowing how best to use communication for their ultimate benefit becomes a major task that individuals and organisations should work very hard to achieve.

This paper helps in navigating that path which will take us to where we ought to be in the attempt to strategically and maximally use communication for our personal growth as well as institutional survival and preservation.

2.   Statement of the Problem

Public Relations has been in existence from earliest times. As at then, the power of Public Relations had been evident in the way leaders sought to influence perception, which is what the practice is all about. However, according to Dilenschneider (2000, p.1), what is new about Public Relations is "our growing awareness of its strategies and tactics." Without doubt, strategy and tactic are the main essence of communication in Public Relations! This is where corporate and strategic communications take their root. But unfortunately, in all available Public Relations textbooks the researchers have had access to, not even one has clearly and specifically stated that there are indeed any difference(s) between corporate and strategic communications. This study was, therefore, conducted to assess how Public Relations practitioners in Cross River State perceived these two communication concepts as well as what they understand to be the difference(s) between them.

3.   Research Questions

The following research questions served as guide for this study:

(i)   What is the difference between corporate and strategic communications?
(ii)   How do Public Relations practitioners in Cross River State perceive these two communication concepts?

4.   Review of Concepts

4.1   Understanding Communication

Communication is a very important element of our daily living. In fact, it had been in existence before the creation of man. By the Biblical account recorded in Genesis 1:26, God had said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness…." Here, God the Father was communicating with the other persons in the Trinity – God the Son (see Colossians 1:16) and God the Holy Spirit (see Job 33:4 and Psalm 104:30), and together in agreement, man was created. That is the power of communication!

So, what then do we understand by communication? It is derived from the Latin words, *communico* and *communicare,* which respectively mean "share" and "to share". Sharing involves giving out something which, in this case, is the communicated message, and receiving something back (for example, a reaction). It is the transmission of a message from a source to

a receiver. This is how Harold Lasswell (1948, p.117) had described communication by answering the questions:
- Who?
- Says what?
- Through which channel?
- To whom?
- With what effect?

Even with the popularity of this definition, communication experts still see it as being very deficient in giving proper and adequate meaning to the subject. In illustrating this noticeable deficiency, Baran (2012, p.4) wonders if indeed communication has occurred where the source is a professor who insists on speaking in a technical language far beyond the receiving students' level of skill. Bringing this nearer home, we can also ask ourselves how many of us actually accept that there is communication whenever Hon Patrick Obahiagbon, a one-time House of Representatives member and former Chief of Staff to the Edo State Governor, employs his grandiloquent speech mannerism!

To eliminate this inadequacy in meaning, Hasan (2013, p.3) goes a step further to define communication as a process of sharing or exchanging "ideas, information, knowledge, attitude or feeling among two or more persons through certain signs and symbols." Still, this definition, too, lacks the salient ingredient of giving complete meaning to the term. However, there is one definition that is more inclusive, and that is by Pearson, Nelson, Titsworth and Harter (2003, p.10), which sees communication as "the process by which meaning is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs and behaviour." This definition introduces the element of *shared meaning* or *mutual understanding* which is essential in any effective communication; and it confirms the description of communication by Seitel (2011) as the process of exchanging ideas, and *making oneself understood by others.*

In helping us further to understand what communication really is, Guerrero and Floyd (2006) suggest four types of communication, namely:

(i) *Successful communication:* This is when a message which is intentionally sent is received and interpreted with the intended meaning of its sender. Let's imagine that Mr Bassey, a senior manager in a firm, was angry with his wife when he left home for work in the morning, and in the office, he was nominated to travel with four other managers on a weekend's all-expense-paid working trip to Dubai with their spouses, and their departure was later that evening. He sent a text message to his wife, "Please, pack your bag. Immediately I arrive home at 4.30 pm, we will leave for the airport to catch our 5 o'clock flight to Dubai. This is urgent." At exactly 4.30 pm, he was home and his wife was ready, waiting for him!

(ii) *Miscommunication:* Here, a message is sent intentionally but interpreted in a way not intended by the sender. Let us still use the above illustration: After Mr Bassey had left, his wife, in an effort to make up with her husband, decided to prepare a delicious meal for him. When the text message came, she just picked the phone, read only the first line, and threw the phone away. When Mr Bassey got home at 4.30 pm, he met his wife downcast and crying because she thought her husband was so angry that he had asked her to leave their matrimonial home. Of course, there was no time to explain much, and he left on the trip without her!

(iii) *Accidental communication:* This happens when a message is unintentionally sent but interpreted in such a way that makes meaning as regards the way the sender really felt.

Here, let us assume that Mr Bassey had typed the first line of his message, "Please, pack your bag" but could not complete the message when an urgent work came up in the office that took all his time. Unfortunately, Mr Bassey, without knowing, had pressed the "Send" key and the incomplete message was delivered. Meanwhile, when he later realised that he had not informed his wife of the trip, and the telephone network was bad for him to make a call, he decided to send Mr Femi, his junior manager, to go and inform his wife at home. On the way, Femi had an accident which made it impossible for him to reach Mr Bassey's house, and due to the injury sustained, he could not call to tell his boss what had happened. Eventually, Mr Bassey got home at 4.30 pm and met his wife sad and fuming but with a bag packed to last her a period she thought would be spent in her parents' house. Fortunately, that was not to be; the situation changed for the better when the couple left together for the trip!

(iv) *Attempted communication:* This is when a message is sent intentionally but has not been received. Under this scenario, let us say that the text message was sent but due to network failure, it did not reach its destination. Mr Bassey had got home at 4.30 pm and met the table set but because he was already late, he could not explain much nor sit to eat the meal. He had to travel without his wife!

However, Duck and McMahan (2009, p.18) add a fifth type of communication in which "a message is sent unintentionally and interpreted inaccurately." They see such communication as very dangerous. Take for instance, Mr Bassey, who was very busy in the office, had decided that rather than send a text message, he should send Mr Femi to go and deliver the message to his wife in person. Upon reaching the house, Femi met Mr Bassey's daughter who opened the door for him while her mother was busy in the kitchen; and remembering how her father had stormed out of the house that morning in anger, she smiled. Femi, who had been eyeing her for some time but could not summon enough courage to speak up, took that smile as an invitation for him to flirt with her. Of course, she was very upset with him and that caused him a loss of face!

So, in all of these, how does communication really work? Duck and McMahan say it works in the following three significant perspectives:

(i) Communication as *Action.* Here, a message is sent out and it does not matter whether it is received or not. The impact of such communication is not important.

(ii) Communication as *Interaction.* This involves an exchange of information between two or more persons. There is a give and take, and the impact is mutually felt by participants in the communication process.

(iii) Communication as *Transaction.* This occurs when messages sent and received are mutually understood by those involved in the communication process. At the end, a deal is struck and meaning extracted by all concerned.

From the above, we can conclude that communication at the *action* stage may be *miscommunication, accidental* or *attempted;* but it is indeed at the transactional level that effective and *successful* communication is really established. This is so because at that point, meaning is extracted, and there is a clear understanding between the sender and receiver of the message.

4.2   *Corporate Communication and Public Relations*

What is Public Relations? One commonly used definition is that by the British Institute of Public Relations (IPR) which sees the practice as "the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics" (Jefkins, 1998, p.6). This definition is apt because it connects with how Seitel sees

communication – the ability to make "oneself understood by others." It also connects corporate communication with public relations even as Johnson (2018) admits that "corporate communications and public relations share so many commonalities that you would be forgiven for using them interchangeably." Thus, we can safely conclude, as Oyeneye (2013, p.75) has done, that the success of every corporate organisation and "the attainment of its goals depend, to a large extent, on the effective application of communication."

What then is corporate communication? The *Financial Times Lexicon* defines it as "a management function … dedicated to the dissemination of information to key constituencies, the execution of corporate strategy and the development of messages for a variety of purposes for inside and outside the organisation." On her own, Johnson says the term "encompasses all communication activities that an organisation undertakes, both within and outside the organisation." Two segments of the constituent publics have been identified; and they are *internal* – which refer to those who work inside the organisation; while the "*external* publics are those not directly connected to the organisation but might be affected by the actions and policies of an organisation" (Seitel, 2011).

For effective corporate communication to be carried out within an organisation, the following platforms, as identified by Okoi and Okon (2018), are useful:

(i) Social networking sites: Today, social media, such as *Facebook, Twitter* and *Whatsapp*, have become a major tool for communicating and building good relationship among stakeholders in an organisation.

(ii) Newsletter: Newsletter is an intermittently sent publication including current events or the like, generally or on a particular topic through which an organisation shares stories about its services or products as well as keep the public abreast of upcoming events.

(iii) Flyer: A flyer is a paper tract which catches the target groups' attention as well as inform them of new products/services and their benefits.

(iv) Brochure: This is a powerful communication tool which an organisation adopts to promote its services, and disseminates relevant information about its operations.

(v) Conference: This is an event that is usually organised by an organisation to interact with stakeholders, have face-to-face communication, disseminate information about ongoing projects, and answer questions about its activities, where necessary.

(vi) The internet: This is a broad network where information is obtained and used; and an online relationship built with the publics.

(vii) Email: This is a way of communicating through typed messages sent over the Internet.

(ix) Text messages: Also called SMS (Short Message Service), it is a short message sent through mobile phones.

When properly handled, corporate communication can help the organisation in many ways. These include:

(i) Eliminating rumours and creating an effective communication flow within the organisation;

(ii) Motivating members of staff to contribute more towards the attainment of organisational goals;

(iii) Making corrections where errors have been identified;

(iv) Eliminating, reducing or managing conflict situations that occur in order that peace may prevail;

(v) Providing adequate feedback from the organisation's publics;

(vi) Improving the quality and output of organisational performance; and

(vii) Providing correct and adequate information about the operations of the organisation.

4.3   Strategic Communication: A Step beyond the Usual

To be strategic means to identify long-term or overall aims and interests, and to pursue ways of achieving them. According to Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič and Sriramesh (2007), strategic communication, therefore, is simply "the purposeful use of communication by an organisation to fulfil its mission." Also, as opined by Peter O'Malley, in Shobajo (2012), "strategic communication requires the deployment of institutional communications to create, strengthen or preserve, among key audiences, opinion favourable to the attainment of institutional or corporate goals." Thorson (2018) sees strategic communication as exploring the capacity of organisations, inclusive of corporations, not-for-profit groups and governments, "for engaging in *purposeful* communication" because its strength is the "emphasis on strategy rather than on specific tactics as well as its focus on communications understood holistically." From these, we can see that communication shall remain only communication if its aim is just to send out and receive information, but using it purposefully makes such communication *strategic.* Therefore, with strategic communication, we go far beyond merely communicating to create mutual understanding between our organisation and its publics (which only involves *communication activities*); to strategically positioning the organisation to achieve the purpose for which it was established (which makes use of *results*).

For every organisation, the opinion the public has of its activities, products/services, reputation and corporate image generally matters a lot. This is so because such opinion is the yardstick used in gauging the acceptability, growth and sustainability of such an organisation. Strategic communication helps, in no little measure, to meet these three aims: to create a public opinion about the organisation where there is none; to reinforce an existing public opinion if such favours the organisation; or to alter the existing public opinion if it hurts the organisation's reputation.

How then can an organisation engage strategic communication in order to reach its desired developmental goals? To succeed in doing this, the organisation should put in place a systematic communication campaign plan with the primary aim of achieving its long-term or overall objectives. The following steps are identified and hereby recommended:
-   *Step 1 – Take stock of the situation at hand:* What are the goals of the organisation? How have past communication efforts helped in enhancing these goals? Who are those being served by the organisation? What have been their expectations? What are the noticeable gaps in meeting those expectations? Are there things that were done but which could have been handled in a different way for better result?
-   *Step 2 – Set communication goals:* What are the communication goals of the planned campaign? How are these to be accomplished?
-   *Step 3 – Identify and define your target audience:* Who are the audiences, both internal and external, that are to be reached? What are their preferences in terms of information needs? What are the challenges that may likely occur while reaching out to them and how can these be addressed?
-   *Step 4 – Produce appropriate message:* How closely related is the message to the goals and objectives of the organisation? What can the message contribute to the success of the campaign? Is the message clear, credible, consistent, straight to the point, and useful to the public? Does the message have the capacity to influence its recipient in a positive way?
-   *Step 4 – Identify and select the personnel to use:* Are there enough and capable hands within the organisation that can work in the campaign team? Will the services of experts outside the organisation be required? Who will be assigned to handle each activity of

the campaign? Who are to serve as the spokespersons for the organisation? Are they well trained and can they be used to create maximum impact?

- *Step 5 – Select communication channels:* Which of the media will best communicate the story to the target audience? Who are the link persons in those media establishments? How can special events, product launch, and other such activities be used to generate favourable media exposure for the organisation?
- *Step 6 – Select some specific activities and materials:* What are the activities and materials that will have greatest impact of the campaign? How can such activities as press conferences, dinners, workshops, etc. be used to convey appropriate messages to the public? How can the materials such as press releases, brochures, house journals, and public service announcements be applied to appropriately fit into the campaign effort in order to achieve the desired results?
- *Step 7 – Draw up a feasible budget:* What are the funds available for the campaign? How much will each campaign activity cost? Have approvals been obtained, and releases made to ensure uninhibited flow of activities after commencement?
- *Step 8 – Partner with others:* Are there some organisations, groups or business establishments that can help in the effort to reach the target audience? Can they and are they willing to provide the finances, support, expertise, or connections to assist in successfully driving the campaign?
- *Step 9 – Draw up a realistic timeline*: When will each activity be performed? Have deadlines been set for the implementation of each item on the campaign programme? Have allowances been made to take care of delayed performance of any activity?
- *Step 10 – Review and evaluate activities:* Is there a regular follow-up on every activity covered? What are the identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats as the campaign progresses? Are there areas that need to be strengthened, readjusted, discontinued or endorsed?

Answering the above questions, which constitute the specific tasks under each step of the strategic communication plan, can indeed position an organisation for peace, stability, growth, and profitability.

5.   Theoretical Framework

The situational theory of publics, which James Grunig began to develop in 1968, formed the theoretical framework for this study. The situational theory, being one of the theories of relationship, describes the role of Public Relations in strategic management. It emphasises that for communication in Public Relations to be more effectively managed, specific publics within stakeholder groups should be identified. It sees these publics as situational because "problems come and go … publics arise and disappear as situations change, and organisations rarely, if ever, have a permanent set of publics" (Grunig, in Heath, 2005, p.778).

The theory identifies three variables – *problem recognition* (which allows publics to recognise potential effect an issue can have on them), *constraint recognition* (which refers to how publics perceive problems that can obstruct them from finding acceptable solution to an issue), and *level of involvement* (which shows the amount of interest publics have about an issue). Grunig and Hunt (1984) use these situational variables to identify such publics as non-publics, latent publics, aware publics, and active publics. The extent to which these publics can respectively receive communication and the effect such has on them is the reason this paper seeks to assess how Public Relations practitioners in Cross River State perceive corporate and strategic communications and how these can be applied individually or collectively to achieve desired results.

Thus, the theory recognises the role of Public Relations in the strategic decision-making processes of organisations and its contribution in striking a balance for positive growth between an organisation and its publics. The situational theory focuses on the relevance of developing a symbiotic

relationship or social relations between stakeholders and Public Relations to foster greater participation in all planned activities that can help organisations to attain their specific goals and objectives. It stresses the need for relationship cultivation strategies through a robust communication system between stakeholders and Public Relations practitioners.

According to Jackson, in Center, Jackson, Smith, and Stansberry (2007, p.15), the most important effect of Public Relations is to change behaviour with the PR practitioner playing the chief role as "a catalyst". This can only be achieved when the practitioners, while planning their communication strategies, focus intensely on the most effective way of engaging the publics of an organisation to achieve a specific objective or goal. Situational theory is interested in why people communicate and when they are most likely to communicate. It is interested in who the publics of an organisation are at a specific time, and when communication programmes are most likely to be effective. This is the whole essence of this study, which is to find a better understanding of how corporate communication can be made more effective through the application of strategies and tactics.

6. Research Methodology

6.1 *Research design*

Being a research on perception, this study used the argument method to identify and compare how the respondents really understood the subject matter. Argument, according to Stuffflebeam (2006), is "what we offer through language as a means of proving, explaining, persuading, convincing, or otherwise showing that the truth of something follows from the truth of something else." He further states that every argument has two components – the *claim*, which asserts that something is what it is, and the *evidence*, which is the statement(s) made to prove that the claim is true.

6.2 *Population of the study*

All the Public Relations practitioners in Cross River State of Nigeria constituted the population for the study. However, since every member of the population could not be identified, the list of 118 members of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR), Cross River State Chapter was used as the working population.

6.3 *Sample size/sampling procedure*

The working population served as the sampling frame. Number three was randomly chosen as the starting point while the sampling interval used was six. Therefore, every sixth name from the starting point on the list of 118 members was chosen through the systematic sampling method, thus bringing the total number of respondents to 20.

6.4 *Research instrument*

The research instrument used for this study was the focus group discussion (FGD) which, according to Asemah, Gujbawu, Ekhareafo and Okpanachi (2017, p. 132), is "a natural method for eliciting group opinion on specific issue in a social setting." It is a qualitative method that allows a group of people to "interpret a certain phenomenon." Participants in this research were systematically selected, and shared into two groups of 10 members each.

6.5 *Method of data collection*

The two focus groups met at different times, and each session lasted for about one hour, 30 minutes. Members of each group were asked the same set of questions with the researcher serving as the moderator. The respective sessions and all contributions made by the participants were video-recorded.

6.6 *Method of data analysis*

The data obtained from contributions of participants at the two sessions of focus group discussion were qualitatively analysed. The major approach here was to compare the responses of respondents in order to get at the issues of perceptual meaning and interpretation.

7. Presentation of Data

The 20 participants used for the focus group discussion were demographically segmented as follows:

- *Gender:* There were 13 male, representing 65%, and seven female or 35%.

- *Age:* Four (20%) were below 30 years old, five (25%) were between 30 and 45 years, nine (45%) were between 46 and 60 years, and two (10%) were above 60 years.

- *Educational qualification:* None of them (0%) were holders of diploma and below, Six (30%) held first degree, nine (45%) had masters degrees, while five (25%) were doctorate degree holders.

- *Experience in Public Relations practice:* None of the participants (0%) was still a student, two (10%) had between one and five years of experience, six (30%) – six to 10 years, three (15%) – 11 to 20 years, and four (20%) – 21 years and above.

The next question asked was, "What does the term, corporate communication, mean to you?" Their aggregated response was: Corporate communication, which is different from individual communication, is the organised, planned, periodic and well-structured management of information through the exchange of ideas and symbols to create and maintain positive relationship between an organisation and its various stakeholders or publics.

The participants' aggregated answer to the question, "What does the term, strategic communication, mean to you?" was: Strategic communication is the focused efforts of an organisation, guided by specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound objectives, to understand and engage key audiences towards effecting a voluntary change in behaviour in order to enhance the organisation's desired positioning.

To the question, "As a Public Relations practitioner, which of the two – corporate and strategic communications – will you prefer to use for your organisation's communication management effort?" One participant (5%) preferred corporate communication, one (5%) preferred using both of them, one (5%) said his preference for a communication option was "situational" while 17 (85%) chose strategic communication.

For those who chose strategic communication, their consensual reasons were that:

- It deals more with research updates than use of available information;
- It applies wider options towards solving problems;
- Its tactics are much more proactive and consistently focused and has a measurable definable goal that supports growth;
- It is cost effective – since its communication efforts are targeted, it is easy to achieve much with little resources and effort; and
- It deals more with achieving the organisation's blueprint than merely disseminating information.
  However, those whose choices were different from this gave the following reasons:
- The society is dynamic and communication solution should respond to prevailing circumstances; and
- The two communication concepts are intertwined that both have to go hand in hand.

The next question was "Which of these two concepts do you think would be more potent in moulding a positive public opinion for your organisation?" One (5%) picked both corporate and strategic communication, two (10%) went for corporate communication, and 17 (85%) settled for strategic communication.

Another question asked was, "Which of these two do you think would help to improve the profitability of your organisation? Their responses were: one (5%) – both corporate and strategic communication, two (10%) – corporate communication, and 17 (85%) – strategic communication.

"Is there any difference between corporate and strategic communications? That was the next question asked. Those that answered "Yes" were 18 (90%), and "No" were two (10%).

The last question was, "If 'Yes', what do you see as the difference(s) between them?" Their answers could be summarised as follows:

- Whereas both forms of communication are purpose-driven, corporate communication may be routine communication with the organisation's publics while strategic communication is purposeful and targeted towards the attainment of specific need(s);
- Corporate communication only creates awareness without going further to elicit desired action from the target audience but strategic communication employs "strategy" to achieve specific and predetermined goals within a given timeframe.

8.   Discussion of Findings

The 20 participants in the focus groups, made up of 13 male (65%) and seven female (35%), were very well qualified to discuss the subject matter of this study. By age, they were mature, with 80% of them ranging from 30 years and above. For educational attainment, all of them were graduates, with 70% holding masters and doctorate degrees. Also, for working experience, 90% of them had practised Public Relations for at least five years. All these are in line with the position of Dawson, Manderson and Tallo (1993) that in choosing participants of Focus Groups, the status of participants should be considered such that "their socio-economic status, educational background, religion, sex, age, and so on … might most influence a free and natural discussion."

From responses collated from the focus group discussants, the findings are analysed here based on the research questions earlier set for this study:

- *R.Q. 1: What is the difference between corporate and strategic communications?*
Among the 20 participants at the focus group discussion, 90% of them agreed there is a marked difference between corporate and strategic communications. The differences, as identified by these respondents, are that while strategic communication is purposeful and targeted towards the attainment of specific need(s) of the organisation, corporate communication involves more of routine communication. They further identified the "strategies" employed by strategic communication as the major difference between it and corporate communication.

As commented by one of the discussants, "If communication remains at the level of just creating awareness without going further to elicit the desired action from the target audience, it lacks strategy." He went on to illustrate thus: "A company that sponsors sports and does not use its involvement to build its reputation and increase its market share is not using strategic communication. Strategic communication will exploit this sponsorship to advertise and promote sale of its products." He concluded by, however, adding that "corporate communication should be strategy-driven in order to meet the dynamics of demography, government policies and technology."

Another discussant also commented: "While many claim to have effective communication skills, strategic communication requires more specialised and sophisticated

skills that go beyond just effectiveness to combining effectiveness with efficiency." He continued, "In sum, corporate communication requires ability to produce general communication but strategic communication involves ability to communicate to specialised stakeholders, at clearly defined times, using appropriate tools and technologies to achieve specific and predetermined purposes."

However, one of the participants who did not pick strategic communication as the preferred approach to communicating organisational information made a salient point. He argued that "preference for a communication option [should be] situational [since the choice should] depend on the objective the Public Relations practitioner wants to achieve." This then brings us to the situational theory of publics.

As earlier mentioned, the theory identifies three variables – problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement. Identifying the problem at hand is key to resolving it. Also, recognising the constraints would provide the communicator with the idea on how to save the situation. Then, the level of involvement in taking action towards resolving the problem is very paramount. This perfectly fits the steps to successful strategic communication which, according to Mansfield Inc. (2017), an international Public Relations agency, expects that before a strategic communication plan can be devised, a thorough situation analysis that incorporates research and risk assessment should be carried out. Following these carefully should help to guide the Public Relations practitioner in identifying what appropriate communication option to adopt for his specific engagement.

- *R.Q. 2: How do Public Relations practitioners in Cross River State perceive these two communication concepts?*

To start with, perception is simply "knowledge received via the senses and then interpreted (Weiner, 1996, p. 440). Also, Chandler and Munday (2011, pp. 312-313) see the term as "particular ways of understanding a phenomenon" or "an interpretive process – selective, constructive, and evaluative rather than a passive recording of external reality." They go further to explain that perception is "shaped by such factors as contextual and cultural frames of reference, as well as individual differences, purposes, and needs."

With this knowledge of what perception is, we can now clearly assess how Public Relations practitioners in Cross River State of Nigeria understand the phenomena referred to, in this paper, as corporate and strategic communications. From the findings, they saw corporate communication as "the organised, planned, periodic and well-structured management of information through the exchange of ideas and symbols to create and maintain positive relationship between an organisation and its various stakeholders or publics;" and strategic communication as "the focused efforts of an organisation, guided by specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound objectives, to understand and engage key audiences towards effecting a voluntary change in behaviour in order to enhance the organisation's desired positioning." Between the two communication concepts, 85% of the 20 focus group discussants preferred to use strategic communication for their organisation's communication management effort; 85% of them perceived strategic communication as more potent in moulding a positive public opinion for their organisation; and 85% of them still saw strategic communication as the concept that would help to improve the profitability of their organisation.

Indeed, Public Relations practitioners in Cross River State see strategic communication as the more potent communication tool to be used for the achievement of specific organisational goals and objectives. They chose strategic communication because they perceive

it as having the capacity and capability of dealing more with research updates than use of available information, applying wider options towards solving problems, being more proactive and consistently focused, having a measurable definable goal that supports growth, being cost effective because it is easy to achieve much with little resources and effort since its communication efforts are targeted, and dealing more with achieving the organisation's blueprint than merely disseminating information.

The position of these practitioners align well with the stand of Thorson (2018), who stresses that strategic communication "explores the capacity of all organisations – not only corporations, but also not-for-profit organisations (including advocacy and activist groups) and government – for engaging in *purposeful* communication." To her, the strength of this communication option is in "its emphasis on strategy rather than on specific tactics as well as its focus on communications understood holistically;" and it is particularly valuable due to "the increasing difficulty faced by organisations in differentiating among communication activities (and results) appropriately 'owned' by various functional groups."

9.   Conclusion and Recommendations

From the findings of this study, it is safe to conclude that there is a marked difference between corporate and strategic communications. To, therefore, ensure that strategic communication – the communication option embraced by most Public Relations practitioners in Cross River State – is effectively used, the following recommendations are made:

(i)   Since the publics of Public Relations in contemporary Nigeria, as in the rest of the world, are not docile but have now become more active, more sensitive and more informed as a result of enormous information available on the Internet, corporate communicators should embrace strategic communication in order to achieve maximum impact;

(ii)   Due to the fact that the world is becoming more complex and society, more technologically-driven, organisations should involve more in strategic, rather than ordinary, communication;

(iii)   MDAs (that is Ministries, Departments and Agencies) and other organisations should endeavour, at all times, to engage qualified practitioners in their Public Relations Departments because the use of unqualified personnel has done, and is still doing, incalculable damage to the reputation and image of especially government institutions and political office holders; and

(iv)   Drawing from the above, organisations should always allow professional communicators within their fold to be involved in strategy formulations so that their communication plan could seamlessly align with the overall organisational strategy.

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