

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS ON CONTRIBUTIONS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS TO CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN EKEREMOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT COUNCIL, BAYELA STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

PR practice has been present in every community where people have lived since the dawn of time but its level of presence in LGCs in Nigeria is not certain. This study therefore examined the level of PR practice in Ekeremor LGC, Bayelsa State, Nigeria, and public perceptions on its role in crises management. The study combined observation and survey and adopted multistage sampling to selected 384 participants from the local government area who responded to a questionnaire. The study used explanation building technique, simple percentages and mean scores for data analysis. Findings show that the level of PR practice in Ekeremor LGC is predominantly carried out by political appointees and external consultants and not by professional internal PR employees. However, the public perceive PR as relevant in crises management and report that it significantly contributed to the management of crises in the LGC. The outcome of the study supports the postulation of the Public Relations Transfer Process Model that communication specialists can explore PR methods and strategies to turn antagonistic situations in government into favourable attitudes. The study recommends that LGCs should appoint professional full-time PR officers into their PR departments and give them a free hand to carry out their duties without attempting to turn them into propaganda machinery.

Keywords: Communication; Conflict; Government; Management; Professionals; Publics; Public Relations Transfer Process Model

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Public Relations (PR) is an ever expanding profession globally as many organizations increasingly require avenues to communicate organizations' activities, goals and expectations to employees, patrons and the general public in efforts to engender favourable opinions from them (Ahmad, 2012; Ahmad & Idid, 2020). PR is defined as a strategic communication process used by businesses or organizations to build favorable relationships with target audiences (Ugwuanyi & Odigbo 2012). PR practice involves the planned and sustained efforts to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its publics (Apuke &

Gambura, 2017). PR activities extend to all efforts mobilized towards a mutual relationship within and outside organizations, which are largely facilitated and coordinated under the principles of communication hence, communication becomes a pivotal tool through which PR and its activities are realized (Otubanjo, Amujo & Melewar 2010, Ufuophu-Biri & Ijeh 2021). This suggests that PR and the reputation of organizations are inextricably linked and this makes PR crucial in the operations of organizations. PR in organizations is based on a comprehensive two-way management communication process that covers both internal publics (staff) and external publics (patrons/customers, competitors, regulatory agencies, government, communities and the general public) with the goal of enhancing understanding of the institution's tasks, goals, accomplishments, and needs. PR therefore serves to reinforce organizational communication as well as to preserve mutual relationships among its constituents (Kamil 2020; Mat Tazin & Kaur 2017). PR, according to Ugwuonah and Okonkwo (2019), is also an important instrument for improving employee performance, establishing, supporting, and growing stability in firms. In the light of this, Ghassabi and Zare-Farashbandi (2015) stressed that PR concerns the total communication of any organization. In the views of Fall (2004) and Grunig (2011), it is the skillful application of communication to confront unfavorable conditions with the goal of changing them into positive essentials for the benefit of humanity.

It is believed in some quarters that PR began in Nigeria with the introduction of the first newspaper – Iwe Irohin – by Henry Townsend in 1859 and that there are five dominant phases in the evolution of PR techniques in Nigeria viz: Public Enlightenment Era (1859 – early 1930s); Public Relations Broadcasting Era (early – mid 1930s); Political Propaganda Era (late 1930s – mid 1940s); Public Information Era (1945 – early 1960s) and Professionalization Era (early 1960s – Date) (Otubanjo et al 2010, Ufuophu-Biri & Ijeh 2021). PR practice is said to have begun with the public enlightenment era because one of the objectives of the first newspaper was to inform parishioners and the public of weekly church activities. It was also known to have carried information on socio-economic issues such as colonial administration activities, foreign affairs, trade, advertisements and other forms of public announcements hence the name “Public Enlightenment”. The next phase in the evolution of PR in Nigeria was in the realm of governance. Public Relations Broadcasting Era describes the introduction of radio service in Nigeria in the form of Radio Distribution Services which relayed the messages of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), London, in a bid to curtail rapid growth of unfavourable sentiments against colonial Britain among Nigerians. This era metamorphosed into the Political Propaganda Era, when the British government was forced to deploy every public information avenue to counter German propaganda associated with the Second World War. In this era, the first Information Centre was established in Lagos by the colonial administration in Nigeria and this became the origin of ministries of information in federal and state governments in the country as well as information and public relations units in LGCs (Common Wealth Governance 2024). The Public Information Era was dominated by extensive use of PR to share information designed to influence public attitudes with sufficient awareness of important issues by both public and private sectors actors in Nigeria. This era laid the foundation for modern day PR practice in the country. The last phase of evolution of PR practice in Nigeria is tagged the Professionalization Era because, at this stage of development, PR practice in the country began to assume a professional dimension as many practitioners began to undergo intensive professional trainings and certifications. As a result practitioners

are no longer just technical experts who create media materials/press releases, but also important part of organizations administrative processes as professionals in management.

Some people equate conflicts with the terms “clash”, “tension”, “crisis”, “struggle”, or “friction” but these terms do not provide good definitions of conflict. Instead, they represent a recurrent pattern of a typical disagreement (Ugwuonah & Okonkwo 2019, Ijeh & Ojebode 2015). Conflict is described as a state in inter-personal or group relationship characterized by contradictions, disagreements, fierce arguments, clashes of interests/aims/ideas or a struggle over something, usually on a lesser scale than crisis or war. As people create conflicts in the society, there is need to continually seek balance in conflict positions to alleviate their negative impacts (Ibrahim & Nguru, 2018). When conflict resolution fails to resolve a problem, conflict management takes over. Management of conflict becomes the best option in instances where conflict involves non-negotiable human needs and is deep-rooted and resistant to resolution. There are various ways conflicts are managed; these include integration, obliging, dominating, avoiding and collaborating (Edafejirhaye & Alao, 2019, Sajini & Ijeh 2021).

It is a conflict of opinion or a collision of views between individuals or groups that must be controlled in order for organizations to fulfill their objectives for which PR is a sine qua non. In today's world, PR is perceived as a critical component for managing conflicts as it entails deployment of strategic communication as one of the recommended balancing methods that has proven very effective in conflict management. No matter the approach towards conflict management, many communication scholars hold the notion that PR is a valuable tool in conflict management/resolution (Gilaninia et al., 2013; Rivero & Theodore, 2014; Nwanne, 2016).

Local Government Councils (LGCs) are administrative bases of local government areas in Nigeria and therefore part of the system of governance in the country provided for by the constitution. LGCs are have been described as the structure of government closest to the populace at the grassroots especially the vast majority domiciled in rural areas that make up most of Nigeria's land mass (Majekodunmi 2012). According to Common Wealth Governance (2024) LGCs refer to political and administrative units established to administer a specific locality within a state, hence it is described as the third tier of government after the federal and state governments in Nigeria. LGCs are not immune to conflicts because they are made up of people with diverse backgrounds, personalities, education, and expectations whose actions and reactions may differ. PR tactics such as conversation, mediation, negotiation, arbitration, community relations, and others will go a long way toward encouraging harmony and smooth functioning of LGCs.

The foregoing presents evidence that LGCs are government administrative establishments that have dealings with people from diverse backgrounds and conflicting interests, which predisposes them to conflicts and that PR plays important role in conflict management/resolution. This study therefore attempts to evaluate the place of PR in conflict management in Ekeremor LGC in Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

2.0 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The use of PR in conflict management/resolution has caught the attention of researchers. Fall (2004), in a study on the increasing role of PR in crisis management, aver that timely and

regular transmission of the correct information to the right publics via the suitable media by PR is one technique to eliminate communication gaps in organizations. In another study on the relationship between PR and employee performance at work, Ibrahim and Nguru (2018) report that organizations need to ensure that their internal publics receive adequate information about activities promptly and through appropriate channels in order to minimize avoidable conflicts and help them perform their tasks effectively. On their part, Ahmad and Idid (2020) focused on PR practitioners' role in crisis management and point out that organizations need to give their PR officials access to appropriate channels of communication to help them in their job of crisis management.

The above studies provide evidence of the effectiveness of PR in conflict management. However, these studies and many others seem to focus on non-governmental organizations while neglecting PR's use in conflict management in local government administration such as Ekeremor LGC, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. To what extent is PR practiced in Ekeremor LGC and what is the public's perception on its relevance in conflict management generally? What are perceived contributions of PR to conflict management in Ekeremor LGC among members of public? These questions and the absence of ready answers represent obvious gaps in knowledge which this study on public perceptions on contributions of public relations to conflict management in Ekeremor LGC, Bayelsa State, Nigeria, attempts to fill.

2.1 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

- 1) Ascertain the level of PR practice in Ekeremor LGC of Bayelsa State, Nigeria;
- 2) Examine public perceptions on the relevance of PR in conflict management and
- 3) Find out public perceptions on the contributions of PR to conflict management in Ekeremor LGC of Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

2.2 Research Questions

The study is anchored on search for answers to the following research questions;

- 1) What is the level of PR practice in Ekeremor LGC of Bayelsa State, Nigeria?
- 2) What is public's perception on the relevance of PR conflict management?
- 3) What is public's perception on the contributions of PR to conflict management in Ekeremor LGC of Bayelsa State, Nigeria?

2.3 Delimitation of the Study

This study is limited in scope to PR practice and its role in conflict management in Ekeremor LGC, of Bayelsa State, Nigeria. The period covered by the study is three months (July to September, 2023).

3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Extent of PR practice in LGCs in Nigeria: PR is essential in any human establishment that engages in the planned management of persons and resources in order to achieve defined goals. In view of this, it is not surprising that government agencies/functionaries (including LGCs) rely extensively on PR to succeed. PR has always been a management function and this is expected to be the case in LGCs, but there is evidence that PR system in many LGCs in Nigeria is ineffective (Common Wealth Governance 2024). This as a result of several factors among which are lack of understanding among LGC authorities on the need to adequately deploy their PR Units to inform the public on their programmes, actions and expectation. There is also the problem of non-professionals being appointed into PR Units of LGCs on grounds of politics and nepotism, and the unpreparedness of PR officials in LGCs to seek professional development in the field (Fall 2004; Ijeh & Ojebode 2015).

The lapses in PR practices in LGCs in Nigeria notwithstanding, PR Units in government establishments (including LGCs) are known to perform some crucial functions which go a long way to initiate, create and sustain favourable atmosphere for government to administer at the public sphere. These functions include media relations; community relations; sponsorships and community event organization (Nwanne, 2016, Sajini. & Ijeh 2021). The media relations function entails establishing and maintaining good working relationship with media houses and to furnish them with newsworthy information based on verifiable facts and figures regularly and not propaganda materials. Community relations of PR in government is the deliberate effort of the relevant tiers of government to develop and sustain mutually beneficial interactions/engagements with communities in the geographical space of operations while sponsorship and community event organization functions refer to the deployment of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) principles to initiate the sponsorship and or organization of important community-based projects and events that impact positively on the populace (Igben & Ugboime 2022; Ijeh & Ojebode 2015).

Public Relations and Conflict Management: There is research-based evidence that PR can be successfully deployed to manage conflicts all over the world. With particular reference to local governments, Aligwu and Alegwu (2018) point out that organizations or LGCs facing a crisis should address it by responding quickly, telling the truth and providing constant flow of information to key publics such the stakeholders of the communities. On their part, Alsaqer (2018) and Artysheva (2021) argue that public relations is establishing the relationship among the two groups, organization and the public. This relationship is rooted in mutual goodwill which in turn, goes a long way to manage conflicts. This is the reason PR has been described as the art or science of developing reciprocal understanding and goodwill (Chiakaan & Kente 2015, Oghogho & Ijeh 2017). In doing this, PR analyses the public perception and attitude, identifies the organization policy with public or community interest and then executes the programmes for communication with the public. Oyeleke (2020) observes that effective public relations can create and build up the image of an individual, organization or nation. This is because at times of adverse publicity or when the organization is under crises, effective public relations can remove the "misunderstanding" and replace it with mutual understanding between the organization and its publics.

In another study, Akpan et al. (2009) argues that the contribution of PR in government include implementation of public policy; assisting the news media in coverage of government activities; reporting the citizenry on agency activities; increasing the internal cohesion of the

agency; increasing the agency's sensitive to its public's and mobilization of support for the agency itself. In recent times, Apuke and Gambura (2017) report that PR elements are found in marketing. However, it has gone beyond such notion and has taken its place as a section or department in an organization. This is why in recent years PR departments are being established in some Local Government Councils of Nigeria (Agbodike et al., 2014, Oghogho & Ijeh 2017). This has prompted a lot of scholars to attribute public relations under the department of communication instead of the department of marketing.

Many of the studies (Apuke & Gambura, 2017; Edafejirhaye & Alao, 2019; Emeti & Oyadongha, 2019; Ibrahim & Nguru, 2018; Ugwuanyi & Odigbo, 2012) on the contributions of PR are conducted on the relationship between the banking sector, higher institutions, health sector, religious denominations and the publics. None of these studies have looked into the contribution of a LGC on dispute settling and communal crises at LG levels.

4.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A renowned PR expert, Frank Jefkins introduced the Public Relations Transfer Process Model in 1988. It highlights the necessity for public relations professionals to use effective communication to transform adversarial, prejudicial, apathetic, and ignorant attitudes into states of sympathy, acceptance, interest, and knowledge (Kaleem 2022). According to the model that defined attitude, it is one of the most intricate psychological processes in human society. The hypothesis is understood to be a person's propensity to consistently judge a person, group, organization, thing, or issue favourably or unfavorably (Grunig 2011).

One must first learn how to handle a crisis before it arises in order to appropriately diffuse it. The theory's central claim is that effective communication processes and mutual understanding can transform unpleasant circumstances into positive accomplishments. It explains how communication specialists could utilize PR methods and strategies to turn antagonistic situations in society, organizations, and governments into sympathy, prejudice into acceptance, apathy into interest, and ignorance into knowledge. According to Ugwuonah and Okonkwo (2019), the transfer process model is a remedy for organizational conflict that addresses all unfavorable attitudes in crisis management such as prejudice, antagonism, ignorance, and apathy.

5.0 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a cross sectional research design with a mixed research method comprising observation and survey. The study relied on the observation research method to generate data for Objective 1 which focused on ascertaining the level of PR practice in Ekeremor LGC of Bayelsa State, Nigeria and survey research method to generate data for Objectives 2 and 3 which focused on perceptions on the level of PR use in and contributions to conflict management among the study population. Residents in Ekeremor LGC of Bayelsa State, Nigeria served as the population for observation, from which data was gathered with the aid of a observation checklist and questionnaire while 401,300 persons, being the active projected population of Ekeremor LGC of Bayelsa State, Nigeria served as the population for the survey. The study engaged 384 as sample for the survey, determined from the population of the study based on the Krejcie and Morgan Table for sample size determination from a given population. The study adopted a multistage sampling technique comprising clustered sampling, simple

random by ballot and volunteer sampling. This was achieved by first clustering communities in Ekeremo LGA of Bayelsa State into the 12 wards that make it up. From these clusters, the study adopted balloting to randomly select 6 wards. From these 6 wards, the study adopted volunteer sampling to select respondents to the questionnaire because it was necessary to involve only respondents who understand the concept and practice of PR. Deliberate effort was made to achieve 100% Questionnaire Return Rate by giving out copies of the questionnaire in the selected wards until 384 found usable. Emanating data was analyzed with explanation building technique for observation data and comparison of simple percentages as well as mean score for the survey data.

6.0 DATA ANALYSIS

Demographic Composition of Respondents: A breakdown of the demographic variables of respondents show that 261 out of the 384 of them representing 67.97% were male while female 123 of them representing 32.03% were female. This indicates that more men participated in the study than female. The age distribution shows that members of the public of age between 40-50 years with a frequency of 80, representing 20.83% participated mostly in the study, followed by those between 30-40 years [75 (19.53%)] and respondents between 50-60 years [67 (17.45%)]. Respondents who were between 20-30 years were 59 (15.37%) while those less than 20 years were 57 (14.84%). The least number of respondents according to age distribution were those above 60 years with a frequency of 46 representing 11.98%. The curve in this distribution appears normal with all of them within the range of 11% and 20% of the sample. In the area of education, majority of the respondents represented by 109 (28.37%) had secondary education followed by 98 (25.52%) of them with tertiary education, 97 (25.26%) with no formal education and 80 (20.84%) who had primary education. Again, the distribution curve appears normal within the range of 20% and 28%. The occupational distribution of respondents in descending order indicate that they were mostly self-employed [73 (19.01%)], followed by those engaged in business/trading [54 (14.06%)] and farmers/fishermen/fisherwomen [48 (12.50%)]. Others were Transporters [31 (8.07%)], civil servants and students [29 (7.55%)] each, unemployed [28 (7.29%)], artisans and private company workers [25 (6.51%)] each while politicians were 22 (5.73%). Teachers were the least participants in the study with a frequency of 20 representing (5.21%). The distribution curve is not normal but this is a chance occurrence as the sampling was random. The breakdown in presented in Table 1

Table 1: Demographic Composition of Respondents

Sn	Description	F	%
1	Sex of Respondents:		
a)	Male	261	67.97
b)	Female	123	32.03
	TOTAL	384	100.00
2	Age of Respondents:		
a)	Less than 20 years	57	14.84
b)	Between 20-30 years	59	15.37
c)	Between 30-40 years	75	19.53
d)	Between 40-50 years	80	20.83

e)	Between 50-60 years	67	17.45
f)	Above 60 years	46	11.98
	TOTAL	384	100.00
3	Educational Level of Respondents:		
a)	No formal education	97	25.26
b)	Primary education	80	20.83
c)	Secondary education	109	28.37
d)	Tertiary education	98	25.52
	TOTAL	384	100.00
4	Occupation of Respondents:		
a)	Farming/fishing	48	12.50
b)	Transporters	31	8.07
c)	Teachers	20	5.21
d)	Civil servants	29	7.55
e)	Students	29	7.55
f)	Artisans	25	6.51
g)	Self-employed	73	19.01
h)	Business	54	14.06
i)	Politicians	22	5.73
j)	Private company workers	25	6.51
k)	Unemployed	28	7.29
	TOTAL	384	100.00

(Source: Fieldwork, 2023)

Level of PR Practice in Ekeremor LGC, Bayelsa State, Nigeria: Observation of the level of PR practice in Ekeremor LGC showed that though there was a PR Unit in the Council, it did not have a qualified PR practitioner. Observation further revealed that the Council relied extensively on political appointees such as Chief Press Secretaries and Special Assistants (Media) attached to the Chairman of the local government area, who is the chief executive officer, to handle PR functions. It was also observed that from time-to-time, PR consultants were engaged to assist the Council on specific high profile PR tasks. Arising from the above, this study concludes that the level of PR practice in Ekeremor LGC is predominantly carried out by political appointees and external consultants and not by professional internal PR employees.

Public Perception on the Relevance of PR in Conflict Management: The researchers relied on survey data (Table 2) to address this objective of the study. Respondents were requested to indicate one fundamental feature of PR that makes it relevant in the management of conflicts. Emanating data distribution show that respondents consider the fact that PR opens two-way communication that go a long way in managing crises as the most likely reason for its use in managing crises with a frequency of 177 representing 46.09%, followed by the notion that it builds mutually beneficial relationships [126 (32.81%)]. Other perceptions on PR's use in crises management is that it focuses on doing good deeds and publicizing them [69 (17.97%) and that it initiates mass media propaganda to address issues [12 (3.13%)]. The values of responses were rated on an average scale of 25% (i.e. 100% ÷ 4) with decision rule to accept relevance indicators values of 25% and above and reject those below it. Accordingly, this study

concludes that the public perceive PR as being relevant in crises management mostly because it opens two-way communication that go a long way in managing crises and builds mutually beneficial relationships.

Table 2: Public Perception on the Relevance of PR in Crisis Management

Sn	Relevance Indicator	f	%	Remark
1	PR opens two-way communication that go a long way in managing crises	177	46.09	Accept
2	PR builds mutually beneficial relationships	126	32.81	Accept
3	PR is about doing good deeds and publicizing them	69	17.97	Reject
4	PR initiates mass media propaganda	12	3.13	Reject
TOTAL		384	100.00	

(Source: Field Survey, 2023)

Public Perception on the Contributions of PR to Conflict Management in Ekeremor LGC of Bayelsa State, Nigeria: The study generated data relevant to this area with 5-point likert scale survey questionnaire items and analyzed same with mean score. The benchmark mean on a 5-point likert scale was taken as 3.00 [i.e (1+2+3+4+5) ÷ 5]. The decision rule for the mean score was to accept the assertion where mean calculated > 3.00 and reject the assertion where mean calculated ≤ 3.00. Table 3 shows the mean scores of respondents’ likert scale responses as follows: Provided conducive environment for management of crises = 3.43; Provided opportunities for every disputing party to be heard = 3.43; Provided adequate enlightenment on the contending issues = 3.40 and Provided an atmosphere of mutual trust and understanding among parties in dispute = 3.34. Other calculated mean scores from likert scale response are the notion that PR did not contribute anything to the management of crises = 2.45; PR worsened the crisis situation = 1.90 and PR contributed insignificantly to the management of crises = 1.66. Based on the decision rule, the study accepts assertions that PR provided conducive environment for management of crises; opportunities for every disputing party to be heard; adequate enlightenment on the contending issues and an atmosphere of mutual trust and understanding among parties in disputes. On the other hand, the study rejects submissions that PR did not contribute anything to the management of crises, worsened the crisis situation and contributed insignificantly to the management of crises. In other words, PR significantly contributed to the management of crises in Ekeremor LGC by providing conducive environment to manage crises, opportunities for every disputing party to be heard, adequate enlightenment on the contending issues and an atmosphere of mutual trust and understanding among parties in disputes.

Table 3: Table of Values for Public Perceptions on Contributions of PR to Crises Management in Ekeremor L.G.C.

Sn	Perceived Contribution	SA	A	U	D	SD	∑	M	Remark
		x=5	x=4	x=3	x=2	x=1			
		f	f	f	f	f	f		
		(fx)	(fx)	(fx)	(fx)	(fx)	(fx)		
1	PR provided conducive	111 (555)	98 (392)	62 (186)	71 (142)	42 (42)	384 (1317)	3.43	Positive

	environment for management of crises								
2	PR provided opportunities for every disputing party to be heard	110 (550)	100 (400)	59 (177)	75 (150)	40 (40)	384 (1317)	3.43	Positive
3	PR provided adequate enlightenment on the contending issues	99 (495)	103 (412)	67 (201)	81 (162)	34 (34)	384 (1304)	3.40	Positive
4	PR provided an atmosphere of mutual trust and understanding among parties in dispute	97 (485)	114 (456)	50 (150)	70 (140)	53 (53)	384 (1284)	3.34	Positive
5	PR did not contribute anything to the management of crises	42 (210)	47 (188)	71 (213)	107 (214)	117 (117)	384 (942)	2.45	Negative
6	PR worsened the crisis situation	11 (55)	10 (40)	90 (270)	90 (180)	183 (183)	384 (728)	1.90	Negative
7	PR contributed insignificantly to the management of crises	34 (170)	81 (124)	103 (109)	67 (134)	99 (99)	384 (636)	1.66	Negative

(Source: Field Survey, 2023)

7.0 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study concludes that the level of PR practice in Ekeremor LGC is predominantly carried out by political appointees and external consultants and not by professional internal PR employees. This suggests that internal PR practice in Ekeremor is not yet significant. This finding partly agrees with the submission of Agbodike et al (2014) that PR department are gradually being established in some LGCs in Nigeria. This is so because while the study confirms the presence of a PR department in Ekeremor LGC, it reveals the fact that it is non-functional. This is in line with the postulation by Fall (2004) that PR practice in LGCs is plagued by the problem of non-professionals being appointed to handle PR duties on grounds of political patronage and nepotism, and the unpreparedness of PR officials in LGCs to seek professional development in the field.

The study also concludes that the public perceive PR as being relevant in crises management mostly because it opens two-way communication that go a long way in managing crises and building mutually beneficial relationships. This finding corroborates the submission of Igben and Ugboime (2022) that the public has a favorable opinion of the ability of PR to establish and

maintain a beneficial connection with pertinent publics. This finding also corroborates the central claim of the Public Relations Transfer Process Model that effective communication processes and mutual understanding can transform unpleasant circumstances into positive accomplishments and turn antagonistic situations in societies, organizations and governments into sympathy; prejudice into acceptance; apathy into interest; and ignorance into knowledge. In this direction, the study particularly show that PR significantly contributed to the management of crises in Ekeremor LGC by providing conducive environments to manage crises, opportunities for every disputing party to be heard, adequate enlightenment on the contending issues and an atmosphere of mutual trust and understanding among parties in disputes. This finding is in line with that of Apuke and Gambura (2017) which holds that the ways people perceive an organization largely depends on the effectiveness of the communications function of its PR department. Overall, the findings in this study supports the tenets of the Public Relations Transfer Process Model which postulates that PR professionals can use effective communication to transform adversarial, prejudicial, apathetic, and ignorant attitudes into states of sympathy, acceptance, interest, and knowledge (Kaleem 2022).

8.0 CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that the level of PR practice in Ekeremor LGC is predominantly carried out by political appointees and external consultants and not by professional internal PR employees. This notwithstanding, the public believe that PR is relevant in crises management as it facilitates the maintenance of two-way communication and mutually beneficial relationships which enhance the management of crises. Specifically, PR is observed to have significantly contributed to the management of crises in Ekeremor LGC through the creation of conducive environment for crises management, opportunities to be heard for parties in dispute, adequate enlightenment on the issues at stake as well as mutual trust and understanding.

9.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends as follows:

1. Management of LGCs in Nigeria and other organizations should appoint qualified professional into PR offices on full time basis.
2. PR professionals should be given a free hand to carry out their duties without attempting to turn them into propaganda machinery by management.
3. PR professionals should focus on initiating an sustaining mutual trust and understanding between their organizations and the publics.

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