



BUILDING AFRICA'S IMAGE-THE ROLE OF PR AND COMMUNICATION

"We may have had wars but they are diminishing, we may have had famine, but they are diminishing...it is time for PR practitioners to rise and change the image of Africa, so Africa will rise". His Excellency, Mr Erastus J.O. Mwencha, Deputy Chairman of the African Union Commission stated.

"I need not remind you the damaging impact that negative publicity has had in compounding the internal challenges that we Africans face. None more so, than my own country Ethiopia, which up until recent times remained passive while others told its stories' in the most negative light possible". His Excellency, Hailemariam Desalegn, Prime Minister, Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and Chairperson of the African Union said.

"Africa is rising because we are communicating more effectively with a more active media...communication is helping to close the gap between us and the international world...we need to engage our citizens for feedback and employ participatory methods..." said His Excellency, John Dramani Mahama, President of Ghana.

These sentiments were expressed at the *1st All Africa PR and Communications Summit* held in the ancient city, Addis Ababa in May. The theme, *Rising Africa-The Imperative of Communication*, directed several discussions around how public relations and strategic communication was imperative in building the brand called Africa. The conference purposed to set the agenda for Africa's image management and development as well as create a platform for discussions on the communication practice across the continent.

AFRICA'S DENTED IMAGE

Africa's image has indeed seen a number of downsides over the years. The continent has been characterised by several years of war and famine in Liberia, Rwanda, Ethiopia, DR Congo and many others. Serious corruption practises and the greed of some presidents on the continent are evidenced by the millions of dollars in Swiss accounts. The

Apartheid in South Africa, coup d'états and the autocratic rule of the military in Ghana and many other African nations, as well as the greed of power has seen heads of States rule countries for decades.

Beyond this absolutely unimpressive track record of governance, the citizens of Africa have not exactly helped with the kind of image the continent has. Illegal migration, corruption in the public sector the issue of brain drain, importation of Western culture in the arts, fashion and entertainment, exportation of sport talents at the detriment of local level sports, high rates of HIV/AIDS, the culture of borrowing, filth in many homes and cities and the abject poverty that engulfs the continent.

We could go on and on about the perceptions of the African continent as observed by Africans and non-Africans. These unfortunate characteristics of the continent have received and continue to receive massive publicity across the world. Although Africa is not alone in these negative practices, the continuous local and international publicity entrenches perceived images of Africa in the world's mind and negates some right and positive practices on the continent.

This is an example: At the APRA conference, Ghana's Minister of Information and Media Relations, Mr. Mahama Ayariga, reading President Mahama's speech on his behalf, described how independent the Ghanaian media was and the advancement of democracy in the country as a result of this independence. The delegates applauded this statement as it was evidence of hope, not just for Ghana, but the rest of Africa. After this speech, a delegate from another continent, asked me how real and true the statement given about the media freedom was in Ghana. When I gave him specific examples to illustrate the point the Minister was saying, he was baffled and quite impressed saying "wow"! This is very interesting", he then became more interested in doing business in Ghana. Africa's image is severed. Africa's image is broken; Africa's image is damaged and needs to be fixed.

Africa's image presently

Although there seems to be a bias towards the negative sides of Africa from both the Western and African media, the story of Africa is changing and quite rapidly too. Now, beyond the news and features of poverty and corruption in African states, stories on trade partnerships and investment, new forms of African literary works and

entertainment have also become visible. As in the case of Ethiopia, their President said “nowadays, one hears less and less of war and famine whenever Ethiopia is mentioned in the global media. But, more and more of the progress it is making in its war against poverty and deprivation through a democratic development path of its own choosing”.

This is also the case of other African countries. For instance, Ghana’s sustained democracy has attracted some foreign investors into the country and enhanced international trade in the country. The country has also nurtured entrepreneurs, such as Kofi Amoabeng of UT group, whose work is receiving international recognition. Literary personalities such as the late Chinua Achebe, whose death received international coverage, are well respected across the world. The Nigerian movie industry has broken through internationally with the release of the movie *Last Flight to Abuja*, whose premiere was shown on CNN and its director interviewed on the same platform.

Evidently, Africa is not doing badly at all in terms of its economic, social and physical growth and expansion. The continent is working at meeting international standards in varied industries. However, communication is one of the necessary tools needed for the African continent to build a positive image, discard the old perceptions and rub shoulders with the so-called developed countries.

AFRICA AS A CATALYST FOR GLOBAL COMPETITIVENESS: A CALL FOR A FOCUSED COMMUNICATION AGENDA

This was the theme for the second day of the APRA conference. Delegates and presenters discussed how communication had become the one agenda that could change the image of Africa for good. Three important points were raised and discussed: the need for a communication strategy to transform Africa’s image, the need to engage with the citizenry to enhance participatory communication, and the need for an action strategy to facilitate the business objectives of the continent.

A communication strategy is one of the most essential items that can be used in building a desired image. Jim Lukaszewski, a PR and Communications guru from the USA said “strategy is a driving force in any business or organization. It’s the intellectual force that helps organize, prioritize and energize what they do. No strategy; no energy. No strategy; no direction. No strategy; no momentum. No strategy; no impact”. A communication strategy can simply be defined as a planned series of actions (tactics)

for achieving goals. Strategies can comprise numerous tactics, with many people involved in attempting to reach those goals. These tactics are the specific methods and actions used in achieving the goals. Mrs. Tikolo Kentice, Chairperson of the Public Relations Society in Kenya, made a presentation on *Understanding the 'Strategy' in Communication*. She stated that it is not enough to go along with gut-feeling ideas and media placement plans which usually did not result in achieving business objectives.

This means African communicators must sit down, brainstorm and come out with specific activities and actions which can be undertaken over a specific period of time in achieving set image-building goals and objectives. The communication plan should involve identifying the perceptions presently, identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the continent, identifying how to leverage the strengths, how to deal with the weaknesses, writing out the plan, identifying the target group of the communication drive, specific channels through which this communication is targeted, give specific timelines within which specific activities and actions should have been done and actually implement every action in the plan to the best of abilities.

Secondly, Africa is made up of citizens who tell the African stories best by their way of life. Just as employees are said to be the lifeblood of an organization, so are the citizens of a country to their nation. It is imperative to involve the citizenry in the image-building process because their patriotism and commitment to their individual nations is the best PR and communication tactic ever. As president Mahama stated at the conference, "We need to engage our citizens for feedback and employ participatory methods in our communication efforts". The participatory approach views communication as that tool which does not merely include people in information sharing but also some of that information should emanate from people who are otherwise perceived as "receivers". In the words of Paolo Freire, a seasoned philosopher and communicator, "... no one can say a true word alone –nor can he say it for another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words". The participatory approach also insists people should not be forced to adopt new practices no matter how beneficial in the eyes of agencies and governments. They should be a part of the decision making.

The third important way to enhance and build Africa's image is through an action strategy. Actions are believed to speak louder than words. An action strategy is made up

of changes in an organization's policies, procedures, products, services and behaviour in order to achieve both business and communication objectives. This means, we cannot as Africans say we support environmental protection when we are illegally logging trees and throwing garbage haphazardly. It means we cannot tell the world we are ready to partner with international companies when the procedures of setting up a foreign business in an African country are laborious and simply frustrating. We cannot say we are friendly when we attempt to dupe foreign nationals who come into the country and we cannot say we are world class when our infrastructure, education system, transport, economic livelihoods are nothing to write home about. We need to walk the talk before we can walk tall.

Africa is rising, no doubt about that. Pastor Mensa Otabil, General Overseer of the International Central Gospel Church said that "I believe this is the time for Africa to rise and overtake the world". Ghana's president, John Dramani Mahama, said "It is an exciting time to be African" when he officially opened the 2nd Ordinary Session of the 3rd Parliament of the Pan-African Parliament (PAP) in South Africa a few days before the APRA conference.

As we agree on this age as an opportune time for the continent to not just rise, but shine and grow, we ought to put in the right actions that will support and advance our course. Communication, participation, action; these should be the watch words of the African continent.