

## Use of Public Relations Events as Strategic Marketing Tool

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### Abstract

There is little information on the use and efficient management of PR events as a marketing tool. This study explores the use of PR events as a strategic marketing tool. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight employees and ten customers of the Ghana Revenue Authority, Maakro, Kumasi. The results showed that GRA uses PR events to achieve several objectives and key among them is marketing. However, the scope of the PR events used at GRA is limited, and there is lack of proper coordination. The findings suggest the need to broaden the scope of events in a coordinated manner by the PR and marketing functions to achieve organisational goals. Future studies, qualitative or quantitative, using marketing and PR practitioners should explore factors that could enhance the use of PR in strategic marketing vents to management.

*Keywords:* public relations, public relations events, marketing, marketing tool.

### Introduction

PR and marketing are useful functions for organisational growth and sustainability. Whereas PR involves identifying, developing and maintaining relationships with strategic individuals and groups, whose actions and inactions impact organizational sustainability, marketing is concerned with exploring, creating and delivering value to satisfy the needs of a target market. There are differences in the roles and focus of both functions within organisational thought and practice, but a symbiotic relationship exists between them. This relationship has been the subject of study by organizational scholars and practitioners (see Cutlip, Centre, & Broom, 1994; Baskin, et.al., 1997; Newson, Turk & Kruckeberg, 2003; Rawson,

2005; Yeomans & Tench, 2006; Cameron, et. al., 2008; Wilcox & Cameron, 2009). There is an overlapping role as organisations use both PR and marketing to sell their goods and services. Despite this overlap, there is little information on the management of PR events as a marketing tool. The changing dynamics of PR events as a marketing tool lend itself to academic inquiry. This study explores the use of PR events as a strategic marketing tool. It seeks to contribute further information to the existing relationship PR and marketing. Knowledge of PR as a strategic marketing tool has relevance as PR and marketing practitioners have responsibilities to account for event budgets.

### **Theoretical background: Systems Theory and Marketing Public Relations Concept**

The systems theory (ST) framework underpins the study. It has been used to organisations at the macro and micro levels (Downs, 1988; McQuail, 2000; Miller, 2006). Weckowicz (2000) explains that the ST, which emerged from the biological domain, has been embraced in academic fields such as psychology, cybernetics, history and sociology (Drack & Apfatter, 2007). Communication and organisational theorists have developed models and theories informed by the ST. These include the Open System Theory by Katz and Kahn (1978), structural functionalism by Farace, Monge & Russell (1977), Sociotechnical Systems Theory by Trist (1969), Cybernetic Systems Theory by Norbert Wiener (1948) and Complexity Theory and Self-Organizing Theory (Miller, 2006). The continuous development of related theories to the ST shows the depth of its application for analysing and assessing organisational relationships and complexities.

The study used the ST as an interpretive framework at the micro level and as a theoretical lens to understand the integrative nature of PR events as a strategic marketing tool. The ST assumes the interdependence of employees and several functions and units within the organisation. Cornelissen (2008) noted that both PR and marketing emerged as separate 'external' communication disciplines when industrial organisations realised that to prosper, they needed to concern themselves with issues of public concern and ways of effectively bringing products to markets.

Later research identified the relationship between the two distinct roles ( Goodman, 1994; Belasen, 2008; Argenti, 2009). The complementarity of roles and function led to the development of the concept of "Marketing Public Relations" (MPR). The MPR assumes that marketing of a company's product and services is distinct from the corporate activities within PR (Cornelissen, 2008). The marketing function of organisations coordinates and manage publicity concerning new and existing products – with a particular focus on customers, while PR provides the framework for deploying marketing strategies and tactics (Argenti, 2009). Mershan (2001) observed that marketing and PR have a lot in common as both deals with organisational relationships and employ similar processes, techniques and strategies. Cornelissen (2008) has suggested that organisations must explore ways and means to align the two disciplines. From the MPR perspective, PR events could provide the opportunity for the integration.

PR activities use events as tactics to manage the public around specific issues of interest (Baran, 2009). An event is that phenomenon arising from those non-routine occasions which have leisure, cultural, personal, or organisational objectives set apart from the normal activity of daily life, whose purpose is to enlighten, celebrate, entertain challenge the experience of a group of people. (Shone & Parry, 2004) PR practitioners use events to gain public attention as events create endless opportunities for awareness creation (Roberts, 1993; Deuschl, 2006; Ceylan, 2007) ). Brikau (2002) argued that the evolution from working to a leisure time society has contributed to the trend that makes organisations look for new ways to promote or market their goods and services via events. This study explores the local perspective of the use of PR events and interprets the views within the ST and MPR frameworks.

## **Method**

The study was qualitative, and the design was exploratory. The study focused on the views of two categories of respondents – the employees and customers of Ghana Revenue Authority (GRA), Kumasi Maakro branch. The study used semi-structured interviews to collect data from eight employees and ten customers. Issues explored included knowledge of PR events by GRA, and the intended purpose of events. The data were transcribed, coded

and emerging themes outlined. One of the authors who did not take part in the data collection verified the themes.

## **Results and discussion**

The results are presented under the themes of awareness of PR events, the purpose and use of PR events, and PR events and the vision of GRA,

### **Awareness of PR events at GRA**

All the respondents were aware that GRA organises events periodically. They mentioned the following events: workshops, conferences and seminars. The events are targeted at GRA customers both in Ghana and abroad, especially foreigners who do business in Ghana.

### **Purpose and use of PR events at GRA**

GRA uses events as marketing tools to market vital products and services to customers through seminars and workshops. Respondents perceive that GRA uses events to carry out tax education for stakeholders. The education focuses on why customers should pay taxes, how the taxes are used for, the punishments for failing to pay tax obligations (tax compliance) and other related matters. A respondent's comment sums it up: "the event is an ideal platform for communication on broad tax issues". GRA employees indicated that most events do not achieve the aims due to low patronage. It was mentioned that: "GRA uses PR events as an outreach tool without wasting much time and resources. ". Two respondents remarked, and others concurred with the view that: "An event is a tool for marketing". There was the perception that it is the public's responsibility to file and pay the tax, but it is also a shared responsibility, and events make that happen. GRA also makes an effort to communicate its programmes and activities to its customers, particularly upcoming events by using both the electronic and print media such as television, radio and the national dailies.

### **Events and GRA's Vision**

Two dominant themes emerged: lack of awareness of GRA's vision and the impact of the organisation. Some respondents expressed the concern that: "most of us do not understand what the GRA is trying to achieve". The high level of illiteracy among the taxpayers could account for this. A GRA

employee remarked: "most of the taxpayers have low levels of education and some don't see the need for GRA events." While some people know the vision and mission of GRA, they were not sure whether the events are helping the organisation to achieve its aims. Responses showed that there is lack of proper monitoring of the effect of events. The respondents explained that sometimes, through educational events, some respond by paying their tax obligations. However, there was uncertainty as to the actual number of people who are thus minded. In effect, there were mixed views about GRA achieving its goals and objectives using events.

GRA uses seminar and workshop events as marketing tools to promote their services to taxpayers. This finding is in line with previous reports of the use of PR events and the concept of MPR (Mersham, 2001; Ceylan (2007). Other uses of events by GRA were outreach and education. Matthews (2008) previously identified five broad reasons for special events, namely religious, political, social, educational and commercial. Mersham (2001) also observed that special PR events are used to achieve a combination of objectives such as creating awareness, raising funds, obtaining publicity, promoting products and services, building personal relationships, establishing favourable dispositions, and promoting the organisation's role in the community. Given this, GRA's needs to broaden the scope of using PR as a marketing tool. This would require the effective integration of the PR and marketing functions in managing events to achieve mutual goals. PR events are purpose-driven, so there is need to know their effects, but it appears GRA's monitoring mechanisms are inadequate. Although there were mixed views, the study suggests that a clear communication of the organisation's vision and goals, and the role of PR in achieving those ends, provides the platform for PR to be used strategically as a marketing tool. PR events must reinforce the strategic marketing function of the organisation.

Future qualitative studies should provide an in-depth understanding of the strategic marketing function and how PR events facilitate the process. Moreover, a quantitative study that uses different organisations, and PR and marketing practitioners would provide a better perspective, given the limitations of the current qualitative study.

## Conclusion

The study concludes that GRA uses PR events as a marketing tool, but their strategic use requires broadening of the scope and the integration of the PR-marketing functional activities.

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