PROACTIVE MANAGEMENT OF MEDIA RELATIONS AS A PROTOCOL ACTIVITY

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Abstract
Protocol is an activity-driven task. It can be considered as a down-stream activity of public relations in events management. The protocol man is concerned with order and official decorum in the organisation of special events. Perhaps the most visible person in corporate public events, his performance, to a reasonable extent, determines the success or failure of events. He is a facilitator. Because his operational turf is in the public domain, his activities and those of the media of mass communication meet often, if not always. As news hounds, the media are always a guest of the protocol man at important public functions. The protocol officer, with the media, also plays a critical gate-keeping role as the first port of call to most visiting VIPs. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to consummate an operational marriage between media relations and protocol functions from a strategic point of view.

Introduction
The aim of this paper, therefore, is to consummate an operational marriage between media relations and protocol functions from a strategic point of view. In doing this, we need to first of all understand and appreciate what media relations means as well as the key functions of a protocol directorate.

Media Relations
According to Offonry (1985: 4 ), “Media relations is the deliberate policy action and varied communication activities taken by an organization with a view to winning and sustaining the confidence and goodwill of the various sections of the mass media, thus, removing or at least minimizing the chances of misrepresentation, misquotation, distortion of facts and unfounded criticism by such organs.”
Nkwocha (2009: 50 ) underscores the above definition when he says media relations “ is the strategic public relations function which establishes and maintains mutual understanding, goodwill, cooperation, respect and support between an organization and the mass media practitioners/ owners with the aim of achieving maximum positive publicity, media support, as well as other well defined corporate public relations objectives.”

Functions of a Protocol Department
A typical protocol department is saddled with such assignments as-

i. Handling official travel arrangements
ii. Handling customs issues
iii. Arranging accreditation of expatriates in terms of visas and resident permits, driver’s license and other necessary documents for their stay in Nigeria
iv. Booking hotel reservations
v. Handling other administrative duties such as postages
vi. Booking appointments for official visitations
vii. Choosing of venues and arranging the sitting order for official functions
viii. In charge of vehicle registration, insurance, maintenance, car hire and scheduling of official drivers
ix. Purchasing and distributing official gift items to important stakeholders
x. Serving as an advance party to the CEO at public functions, etc.

Media Relations and Protocol
A cursory glance at the definitions of media relations and what protocol people do immediately reveals the fact that both basically belong to the public relations family. They both address different publics whose impressions, attitudes and behaviours have serious implications for the corporate image and reputation of a government or state. It cannot be denied that the paths of the media and protocol people meet at certain points in the execution of their duties.

Managing the Media as a Protocol Activity
Some, if not all, of the activities handled by the Protocol Directorate in Government Houses across Nigeria are of interest to the media- from the VIPs who the protocol people chaperon around, to the corporate events which they organize and corporate gifts which they distribute to key stakeholders
Against this background, the protocol man has to understand the media and how to manage them in a proactive manner in order not to derail the media relations policy of his employer.
While the major task of media relations should be left to the Director of Press, protocol can only augment this by ensuring that their interface with the media does not raise issues for the Director of Press. This can be done by-

i. Not volunteering information to the media
ii. Not becoming a liaison between VIPs and the media
iii. Not being a media spokesman for his employer/client

Having said this, the question is-How then does proactive management of media relations become a protocol activity?

Invitation to Events
Invitation to events should be sent to the media well in advance. The psychology of the Nigerian media is that when you don’t invite them at all to public events, the following must be the reason-

A. You have something to hide
   i. You have “chopped” their “brown envelop” and/or
   ii. You hate the correspondent and/or his organization
Therefore when they attend uninvited, they come as an “enemy”. As a consequence, we have witnessed a convocation ceremony covered by the media in which the Vice-Chancellor was “absent”. We have also seen government events at which the abuses hauled at the person of the Governor by hoodlums outside the gate of the venue made more news than the juicy news event that took place inside the hall.

Invitations to the media should not only be for coverage. When it is time just to wine and dine, do not forget them.

B. CHOOSING THE VENUE AND ARRANGING THE SITTING ORDER

It is the responsibility of the Protocol Directorate to choose and prepare the venues for Government House activities to which the media are normally invited. To be proactive, the Protocol Officer in charge must be familiar with the kinds of equipment needed by the media to effect an excellent coverage of events. In his sitting arrangements, protocol must be sensitive enough to know that the media must be so positioned as not only to see and hear, but also to feel the event. When such arrangements are in place, the media cherish it and it portrays an organisation as media-friendly.

C. CORPORATE GIFTS

The line between a bribe and corporate gift or freebee is very thin. Four factors separate them.

a) The primary motive of bribe is to influence the media in an effort to hide or distort facts, while a gift aims at seeking friendship
b) Bribe is timed so close to the expected favour, while gifts are associated with milestones in the life of the recipient or society in general
c) Bribe is negotiated. Gifts are not.
d) Bribe is payment for an unethical job, while gifts are an expression of love and appreciation

The festive periods – wedding anniversaries, birthdays, Salah, Christmas, etc. provide a good window of opportunity to distribute gifts with a clear conscience to the media. So, protocol should recognize the critical role of the media in governance and include them in the pecks that flow from the Government House.

D. TRANSPORTATION

Not all media organisations in Nigeria provide means of transportation for their staff, especially those in the field as correspondents. A Protocol Officer who, therefore, makes this arrangement for the media as a component part of his special events management, wins their heart and goodwill for the government he represents.

E. PROTOCOL

In government, protocol has been excised from public relations such that there exists a Protocol Directorate different from the Directorate of Press. Both Directors report to the Governor. To fine tune this set up in order to ensure efficiency and sound labour relations, the Government House Protocol and Directorate of Press should be merged. They both, as individual units, constitute sub-sets under the big family umbrella called Corporate Affairs. This is in line with global best practice.

For better coordination, government houses in Nigeria should establish Corporate Affairs Directorates with a Director who oversees such unit as

a) Press relations
b) Protocol
c) Community relations
d) Parliamentary lobby
e) Political parties liaison
f) Research and documentation, etc.

These sub-units should each be headed by an Assistant Director. This opens up the system and enhances specialization.

Under this arrangement, protocol people should be public relations practitioners with requisite capacity in public relations theory and practice as well as statutorily licensed under the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations to practice.

Conclusion

The paths of protocol and media practitioners meet at certain points of their various functions. Therefore, an appreciation of media psychology and practice is necessary for the protocol man not to constitute himself into a reputation eroder, instead of a reputation enhancer, for his employer. As a critical factor in reputation building, the protocol practitioner needs to be properly admitted into the PR

References
