Facebook As A Public Relations Tool: A Case Study of Kuapa Kokoo Limited

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Abstract

Organizations worldwide have realized the need to migrate online if they are to succeed and stay in business. This growing dimension of organizations migrating and doing business online continues to soar on a daily basis. Kuapa Kokoo Limited (a licensed cocoa buying company in Ghana) is one of such organizations which is using Facebook as a public relations tool. The purpose of this study is to examine closely the use of Facebook as a public relations tool at Kuapa Kokoo Limited (KKL). The study highlights the need for the use of Facebook as a Public relations tool and also brings to the fore the benefits and challenges, associated with the use of Facebook as a public relations tool by Ghanaian organizations, using Kuapa Kokoo Limited as a case study. Eight interviews were conducted from the top management executives, the communications department, the marketing department other staff members of KKL. The findings of this study confirm the potential ability of Facebook as a tool for enhancing give and take communication between organizations and their audience as. The study concludes that Facebook holds the potential to make PR more symmetrical.

Keyword: Facebook, Kuapa Kokoo Limited, Online Migration, Social Media, Public Relation Tool

Introduction

New media in the 21st century was welcomed with diverse sentiments. Some people were optimistic about new media playing a positive role by widening the consumer choice with higher user participation, others were pessimistic, fearing it was

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coming along with media (cultural) imperialism. However, one major benefit which has won many hearts for new media is that it has changed the business environment by causing a migration of business activities from offline onto online platforms.

According to TechTarget.com, "Facebook is a popular free social networking website that allows registered users to create profiles, upload photos or videos, send messages to friends, family and colleagues… includes public features such as Marketplace, which allows members to post, read and respond to classified ads; Groups, which allow members who have common interests to find each other and interact; Events, which allows members to publicize an event, invite guests and track who plans to attend; Pages, which allows members to create and promote a public page built around a specific topic, and Presence technology, which allows members to see which contacts are online and chat. Each member's profile contains several key networking components, the most popular of which is arguably the Wall, which is essentially a virtual bulletin board" (whatis.techtarget.com, 2017).

Facebook is rapidly becoming one of the most powerful public relations tools for online platforms. Using Facebook as an online Public relations tool allows companies to increase their reach, getting in front of interested people with engaging content when and where they are most receptive to the message. Over 4,000 organizations created Facebook (FB) pages in 2008 when it first allowed organizations to join. Facebook pages provide a way for organizations to share news and company information (Porter, 2010). Stakeholders have shifted from visiting organizations'

websites to visiting Facebook pages. A Webtrends study undertaken in the year 2011 found 68 percent of the top Fortune 100 companies have seen a decline in unique (first-time) visitors to their websites; while 40 percent of these companies have seen an increase in unique visits to their Facebook sites. Using Facebook as a public relations tool has gained popularity around the world, especially in Europe, America, and other advanced countries. The trend has also emerged in Africa as more and more public relations practitioners on the African continent embraced the use of Facebook as a public relations tool. Thus, Kuapa Kokoo Limited, a licensed cocoa buying company in Ghana, has for some time has also been using Facebook as one of its public relations tools, just like many other Ghanaian companies. It is expected that the use of social media such as Facebook may very well contain the solution(s) to the problem faced by most organizations in Ghana with regards to their visibility and continuous interactions with stakeholders. Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge on the use of Facebook by organizations by investigating the use of Facebook as a public relations tool at Kuapa Kokoo Limited.

Objective:

Objective for the following study is to:

- To ascertain the reasons for which Kuapa Kokoo Limited uses Facebook
- To determine the effectiveness of Facebook at Kuapa Kokoo Limited
- To identify challenges associated with the use of Facebook at Kuapa Kokoo Limited

Literature Review

Public Relations (PR)

Despite the several definitions on PR, two stand out. The first by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) considers PR as "a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its publics". This definition is relevant to how it captures the fact that effective PR goes hand-in-hand with strategic communication. The other definition is by the British Institute of Public Relations (BIPR) which describes public relations as "the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its publics" (Sriramesh, 2004: 217). The relevance of this definition is in its emphasis on ensuring PR efforts are planned and the planning should be rooted in information from research (Jefkins, 1986). Since proper PR practice should rest in planned efforts based in research, this present study which analyses Facebook as a public relation tool will examine whether KuapaKokoo Limited assesses the effectiveness of their Facebook page and plan their PR programs with the results. PR practice is not only about trading in information; It can be realized in advisory roles (Macnamare, 1996). This aspect will also be investigated in this study.

Public Relations and Social Media

Progress in technology has led to innovations in the realm of communication by making it possible for organizations to communicate in ways that were not imagined. This expansive revolution has extended to communication modes from the traditional to more interactive ones such as social media, which can be both informative and persuasive (Bivins, 2008). Social

media, in its various shades, has become a useful tool for organizations to communicate with their internal and external publics and several PR officers have attested to this fact (Wright and Hinson, 2009). Organizations and individual benefits from online communication as it essentially serves them with a means for circulating and receiving timely information (Esrock & Leichty, 1998, 1999; Perry, Taylor, & Doerfel, 2003; Springston, 2001). This stems from the conception corroborated in researches to the effect that PR work is tied to technology and social media. This coincides with the encouragement from McCorkindale (2010) to organizations to engage Facebook to use since it has the potential of allowing them to communicate with several publics.

Facebook as a Public Relations Tool

It is evident that the advent of new online avenues of information, the traditional avenues have been threatened and the young population has been drawn to the virtual world because of how it makes information readily available just by the click of a button within seconds (Pew Research Centre, 2008). These changes have rocked the world of PR, it was reported that PR officers consider that communication strategies of their organizations have changed after the invention of the blog and social media. Previous studies on the subject in Ghana have focused on the implications of Facebook for PR practice. However, this study will consider how the use of Facebook can affect public relations practices in Kuapa Kokoo and which can be extended to the larger Ghanaian work environment.

Facebook and Organizations

Social networking sites (SNS)–Facebook in particular - had the initial primary function of connecting people. However, its applications have extended beyond this and can be used for the promotion of products, building a fan base and reaching masses. As much as an organization can use SNSs to reach the masses, the reverse can hold that opponents can use them to campaign against the organization. All these provide interesting research areas. (Caers and De Feyter, et al., 2013).

Fan et al.'s (2009) cross-cultural revealed that promotions on SNSs are not only based on just posting products by the organization; Cultural factors play a great role and individuals often search for their products. This calls for improved use of SNSs by organizations. Other studies in the area include Casteleyn et al. (2009) who have proposed a system for assessing marketing potential on Facebook which is quite similar to Agnew and Sindhav (2009) who added business model perspective; Vorvoreanu (2009) found that people's readiness to be associated with an organization on Facebook does not necessarily mean they are ready to communicate with the organization; Bryson et al. (2010) investigated the merits of Facebook in diverse settings. All these researches have unraveled new research potential, one of which is the concern of this current study to investigate Kuapa Kookoo in Ghana utilizes Facebook in their PR strategies.

Such research efforts are necessary for the reported usefulness of Facebook including but not limited to improved communication with varying publics which lead to improved relationships and hiring of potential staff (Steiner, 2009; Shippert, 2009; Bortree and Seltzer, 2009; Jo and Kim, 2003; Graham et al.,

2009; Roberts & Roach, 2009). These benefits have been accruing mainly to the profit-based sector over the non-profit sector (Waters et al., 2009; Curtis et al., 2010).

Theoretical Framework

This study takes inspiration from Grunig and Hunt's (1984) Four Models of Public Relations, which include press agentry, public information, asymmetrical, and symmetrical models of public relations practice. This model has been used to explain the public relations practices of organizations. The press agentry and public information models have dictatorial tendencies as communication in those models is conducted in one direction (i.e., from the organization to the public). The two-way asymmetrical is heightens the dictatorial tendency of the first two because, in addition to the one-way mode of communication, it seeks to persuade only the public–not the organization. These go against the mutuality that is supposed to be seen in PR practice.

The shortcomings of the above models are what make the two-way symmetrical model most preferable since it enhances mutuality in the communication and persuasion between the public and the organization (Guth & Marsh, 2000). The two-way symmetrical model is characterized by dialoguing with the public and making their inputs as relevant as those of the organization in the resolution of conflicts and promotion of mutual respect. That does not go without saying, however, in practice, press agentry is often paired with the public information model while the two-way asymmetrical model goes with the two-way symmetrical model and this study hopes to investigate which pair is mostly used in the setting of this research.

According to Grunig (2009), many practitioners are using new media just as they used old media by dumping messages on the public rather than as a strategic means of interacting with their publics and bringing information from the environment into organization for decision-making. It is therefore interesting to find out the following research question. In line with the Grunig and Hunts model, it is believed that social media and, in this case, Facebook holds the potential to make PR more symmetrical.

Research Questions

RQ 1. Are public relations practitioners in Kuapa Kokoo Limited uses Facebook as a tool relationship-building or as a means to dump messages on the publics?

Methodology

For this study, a qualitative in-depth interview approach was used to obtain information. It provides a valuable channel to collect and assemble the key theme needed to answer the research question. Apart from the interviews, information was also gathered from the Facebook page of Kuapa Kokoo Limited. Kuapa Kokoo Limited was chosen for the study because of the researcher's familiarity with the organization and could, therefore, have full access to the organization. Access is such an important consideration to work cooperatively with the respondents.

All respondents were purposively selected for the study. The respondents were deemed to be familiar and also knowledgeable about the operations of the Facebook account of the organization and were therefore in positions to contribute meaningfully to the study. Interviews were conducted with eight

respondents comprising two from the top management executives, the communications department, the marketing department and two other staff members of Kuapa Kokoo Limited. All interviews were conducted at the premises of Kuapa KoKoo Limited in English.

The interviews were focused on the Facebook account of Kuapa Kokoo Limited - the company under study. Descriptive analysis was undertaken by examining the impact of Facebook as a public relations tool for an organization such as Kuapa Kokoo Limited. Responses obtained from the interviews were very useful in analyzing the data. The data for the study were gathered on 10th May 2017. Data were analyzed based on its relevance to the theoretical concept and research questions. New and unexpected data that emerged and were deemed to be essential to describe the phenomenon under study were added to the final report to ensure a complete description of the findings.

Results and Findings

The findings from in-depth interviews are presented in line with the main objectives of the study which have been discussed as follows:

Background of Respondents

Respondents to this study comprised public relations practitioners, management and staff of KuapaKokoo Limited. Two people each from the public relations section, management, and staff of KKL were selected to represent the public relations department, management and staff of KKL. The management and staff were purposively selected by the researcher based on familiarity with the nature and operations of the KKL Facebook

page, and they were all based at the headquarters where the PR unit is located.

The following procedure was adopted: a cover letter noting the purpose of the interview was delivered to respondents personally by the researchers. The questionnaire was later delivered to the respondents and a follow up through telephone was made to set up an appointment. All interviews were conducted in the offices of the interviewees, and English was used as the lingua franca. During the interviews, the questionnaire forwarded to the interviewees was used to guide the conversation.

Reason(s) behind the use of Facebook by KuapaKokoo Limited

The study found that KuapaKokoo Limited acquired an official Facebook page in 2014. Asked about what informed KuapaKokoo Limited to adopt a Facebook page, one of the two public relations staff of the company in charge of handling the Facebook page said ''KuapaKokoo Limited started a Facebook page to engage with to their publics (stakeholders).''

He further stated that KuapaKokoo Limited opted for Facebook as one of its public relations tools because they realized that it will help them to disseminate information quickly to its mass publics. ''Facebook has helped KuapaKokoo Limited to disseminate information to our partners, staff, and members fast and easily''. KuapaKokoo claims an average weekly of over 217 followers on Facebook.

The Corporate P.R.O. for Kuapa Kokoo stated as follows: "We posted information about the things we do, and to an extent

some awards that we have won on our Facebook page and we received congratulatory messages from our customers."

Effectiveness of Facebook as a Public Relations Tool at Kuapa Kokoo Limited

The study found that KKL's Facebook page is used as a medium for them to engage with their audiences. Questioned as to the extent the establishment of Facebook has helped KKL, the administrator responded that "in helping us to disseminate information to partners, members, staff and other stakeholders including the media, feedback is also quickly received from these quarters."

The interviewed revealed that Kuapa Kokoo usually gets posts from their audiences about their products and services. The other handler of the Kuapa Kokoo Facebook page pointed out that "Comments on our Facebook page help in decision making. It tells us what the concerns of customers are and some of these concerns influence decisions." A staff member of Kuapa Kokoo intimated that he posts his concerns on the company's Facebook wall using an anonymous name. The findings of this study, therefore, confirm the potential ability of Facebook to be used as a tool for enhancing reciprocal communication with their audiences.

The study found that the organization's Facebook page is also used to resolve conflicts with the public when such a situation arises. They gave this assertion credence to when one interviewee narrated that a follower sometime last year took offense and used harsh words (attacking management of the page) because his inquiries for a job opportunity was not responded to for some time. The fellow later became sober and apologized when he was

explained the delay in responding to his inquiry. The findings of this study confirm the assertion that KuapaKokoo used the public information model Limited.

Challenges Relating to the Use of Facebook at KuapaKokoo Limited

On the issue of challenges that confront the organization's use of Facebook, the managers were quick to point two issues; dealing with negative comments and answering a big number of questions from followers. They also felt that some patrons exploit the KKL Facebook page to promote their agenda by asking for employment opportunities or promoting their web pages among others. When asked of the specific challenges Kuapa Kokoo encounters in using Facebook in the organizational public relations practice, the public relations practitioner mentioned some instances where patrons used harsh words for management because the information, they sought was not readily available.

Other challenges that KuapaKokoo Limited frequently encounters in their usage of Facebook were responding to a big number of questions that are asked by the company's followers channeled through the Facebook wall and availability of spurious information. The PRO again revealed that technology gaps also keep some potential publics from reaching out or sending information to them through their Facebook wall and quoted that ''farmers constitute a majority of the company' members and a huge chunk of them can't read or write while some of them based on where they reside (the country's remote areas) can't assess the internet and such, are not using the platform to interact with us."

The researcher also finds out that their Facebook pages have been used to dispel rumors and send out news stories about the organization's activities to journalists for publication in their newspapers by timely alert prominent media professionals whenever we upload a story on our Facebook page.

A senior manager from the management section adds, "I have read some stories in the dailies that emerged from our Facebook page." He further pointed out that ''using Facebook to reach out and disseminate information to our stakeholders has been very fruitful.''

Conclusion

The study leads to the conclusion that many organizations worldwide use Facebook as a public relations tool to connect with their publics. KuapaKokoo Limited (Ghana) is among such an organization which has benefited from using Facebook as a public relation tool. Indeed, the study even suggests that KKL could have benefited even more if a lot of attention was dedicated to their Facebook page. KKL hooked to the Facebook page since social media generally and particularly Facebook were seen as an information hub for their present and prospective audiences apart from their website page. The results indicate that Facebook was the best place for KuapaKokoo to place information about KKL activities and also the place for getting feedback from their audience. Facebook was also seen as a very interactive platform where instant feedback was received from the organization's publics. Finally, KuapaKokoo Limited public relations practitioners have realized Facebook to be an effective communication tool.

Recommendations

With the study indicating that KuapaKokoo limited decided to adopt Facebook as a public relations tool so that they create another avenue for the organization to communicate with its staff, members, partners and all those who constitute its publics. And the decision based upon the realization that the world is now a global village through the use of the new media (internet) of which Facebook is an integral component, it is recommended that KuapaKokoo take steps to promote its Facebook page to entice lots of its public who are not interacting with it at the moment to feel the urge to do so. This would enable KuapaKokoo to realize the full benefit of using Facebook as one of its public relations tools. Duncan-Durst (2009) indicates that unless organizations spend at least $10,000 a month to work with their own Facebook sales representative, they are forced to rely on "Facebook help and prayer to resolve their marketing challenges."

With the findings indicating that the KuapaKokoo Facebook page has been effective because of its interactive nature and is used as a conflict resolution mechanism in addition to the feedbacks influencing the company's policies, it is further recommended that the public relations unit of KuapaKokoo raised to the status of management position. This would enhance the unit's (public relation) capability to explain and influence decisions and policies at the management level and not through another management member (the administrator).

With the findings again indicating that the challenges that confront KuapaKokoo in the way they use of Facebook as a public relations tool were dealing with negative comments and

answering the big number of questions from followers, it is recommended that the Facebook page handlers of KuapaKokoo are equipped with industry best practices that foster online relationship building.

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