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Public Relations, Publicity, and Theatre Profitability in Nigeria.

By

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Introduction

Theatre in Nigeria has grown over the years to become both professionally and academically acclaimed. According to Adedeji and Ekwazi (1998), the theatre emerged in two forms, the Theatre in Yoruba, which can be traced back to the period before the amalgamation of the protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria with the Colony of Lagos in 1914, and the Theatre in English which is traceable to the education introduced by the British Colonialist and the political activities around 1960. The theatre in Nigeria has witnessed dynamic growth over the years as pioneered by the likes of Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola and Duro Ladipo for the Theatre in Yoruba, and Wole Soyinka as well as Ola Rotimi for the Theatre in English. The study of the Nigerian theatre has since grown through the contribution of scholars such as Olu Obafemi Biodun Yeyifo, Ayo Akinwale, Luky Kowoworola and so on who have expanded the frontiers of knowledge.

Since the beginning of the theatrical movement in Nigeria, the theatre has always been very expensive to manage. According to Adedeji and Ekwazi (1998:78) "...theatre is a risky venture and making the theatre pay its way without subsidies is even more hazardous". They, however, explain that one of the major ways by which the theatre has been sustained over the years has been the impressive attraction of audience patronage. Audience patronage is a backbone for the survival of the theatre for two salient reasons. Firstly, a performance can never be complete without the audience, and secondly, audience patronage is central to theatre profitability.

The steady profitability of the theatre as however, engendered by huge turn-outs for performances, hence high box office earning, has been

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threatened in recent times due to the emergence of technological facilities. These facilities have encouraged the former or potential theatre audience to sit at home and have the entertainment brought to them, rather than for them to go in search of the entertainment. They include Television, Video, cable, and the latest addition which is the Internet.

Consequent on the continuous spread and adoption of these technologies, audience patronage of the theatre has continually dropped. This condition is not only peculiar to Nigeria rather, it is also reflected in other countries of the world. For instance, while describing the theatre attendance habit of the people in United States, Bordwell and Thompson (2004:4) state that "only a small part of the population visits the theatre regularly. In the United States, habitual movie-goers ... make up less than 20% of the audience ..." They explain further that far more people watch films on video than in theatre, therefore causing less money to go to the theatre since the remaining 80% of the population watch the movie at home and at their convenience.

It is therefore not surprising that some theatre practitioners now seek other means of expression other than the stage since stage performances seem less and less profitable. According to Bamidele (1992:262) and as cited by Adedeji and Ekwazi (1998:162). "We no longer see those actors we were used to on stage. Their faces are now a constant feature on the screen..."

This paper therefore examines the possibility of increasing theatre and profitability in Nigeria through the use of Public Relations, with particular emphasis on the use of Publicity.

Literature Review

Public relation

Public relations, because of its emerging status, has been subjected to numerous definitions over the years. Most scholars and practitioners have defined the field according to their requirements and focus at the time, thereby colouring it with their opinions. Baskin et al (1997) describes public relations as being difficult to sum up in a brief statement. They also said that the very nature of the profession and its constant adaptation to the needs of the society makes it at best a moving target of definition.

According to Baskin et al (1997:4)

Attempts to define the public relations discipline are frequently conflicting and generally diverse. Some definitions list the kinds of organization that use public relations (all kinds). Some dwell on the media use... (All media) still some focus on the publics, or target audience, with which public relations communicates (all publics)

They also note that some scholars even conclude that public relations no longer exist. Nevertheless, there are some definitions of the discipline that are very prominent and among them are the following:

The British Institute of Public Relations (BIPR) defined public relations as “the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish mutual understanding between an organization and its public,” (Virginia, 1999:10). Here, the focal need for pragmatic understanding between organizations and the publics are used as premise for the conceptualization of public relations.

Another popular definition is the one that was adopted during the First World Assembly of National Association of Public Relations in Mexico City. According to this definition which is popularly referred to as the “Mexican Statement”, public relations is the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organization's leaders and implementing a planned program of action serves both the organization and the public interest” (Daramola, 2003:12). According to Brassington and Pettitt (1997:780)

Public relations is the area of marketing communication that specifically deals with the quality and nature of the relationship between on organization and its publics. Its aim is to generate sound, effective and-understandable flow of communication between the organization and these groups so that shared understanding is possible.

Baskin et al (1997:5) also attempted a definition of public relations by stating that it “is a management function that helps achieve organizational objectives, define philosophy, and facilitate organizational changes”. They even go further to describe what public relations practitioners do:

PR practitioners communicate with a; relevant publics to develop positive relationship and to create consistency between organizational goals and societal expectations. PR practitioners develop, execute and evaluate organizational programs that promote the exchange of influence and understanding among organization's constituent parts and publics (Baskin et al, 1997:5)

Public relations is a specialize discipline that builds and sustains a mutual relationship between an organization and its publics. We use the plural form “publics” because in public relations, there is nothing like the “general public” (Jefkins, 1998:56)

It is also a truism that public relations is all about communication. Here we do not refer to the sending of messages and the reception of feed backs alone, but we also go a step further to emphasize that the process does not end until a mutual understanding has been achieved between the parties involved.

The equilibrium between theatre and public relations is embedded in the fact that both deal with establishing maintaining and progressing relationships. Theatre thrives on relationship that are established between the stage and the pews, that is, between the performer and his audience. In the same vain, PR thrives on the relationships built between an organization and its various publics. However, in order to enhance the profit making chances of the theatre, the relationship has to be extended beyond the theatrical experience. The theatrical experience is only limited to the audience in the theatre and those are not the only target of the theatre. The target audience include the potential audience who are either ignorant of the relevance and potential of the theatre, or who simply believe they are too busy for the experience.

The application of public relations to theatre requires that the theatre be seen as an organization and not only as an experience. Cohen (2000;17) says that "theatre also refers to the company of players (and owners, managers and technicians) who perform..." As an organization, the theatre must seek to establish a good relationship with its potential audience. This can only be achieved through a deliberate and consistent effort to create mutual understanding.

It is only logical then, that if excellent theatrical performance is channeled towards encouraging the current audience to repeat their patronage, awareness strategies should be sued to attract the new audience. One of the important tools available to public relations for the creation of proper awareness in publicity.

Publicity

Publicity as a marketing technique become a fully paid-up member of the entertainment scene after the 1970s (Chambers, 2002). According to Chambers (2002:479), "... a few centuries ago, there was little else other than a town crier, some hastily printed handbills, and a sandwich-board person on the street." But as the world becomes more sophisticated, the techniques of publicity have also advanced.

According to Belch and Belch (2001:22), publicity refers to

Non-profit communication regarding an organization product, service or idea not directly paid for or run under identified sponsorships. It usually comes in the form of news story, editorial or announcement about an organization and/or its products and services... Techniques used to gain publicity include news release, press conferences, feature articles, photographs, films and videotapes.

Newsom and Correll (1998) also describe publicity as information provided to a public without charge. Jefkins (1998) further opines that

publicity is a result of making information known. He explains that this result may be uncontrollable and it may be good or bad. Publicity is also highly advantageous in that it is viewed as being more credible than other forms of promotion. Consumers generally tend to be less skeptical when they encounter favourable information about a product or service when such information is perceived to have come from an unbiased source. Publicity is far more powerful than advertising or sale promotion because its information is usually perceived as endorsed by the medium in which it appears (Belch and Belch, 2001)

Enhancing Theatre Profitability in Nigeria

Having established the fact that the audience is a salient factor in determining theatre profitability, it becomes obvious therefore that creating awareness is one of the most potent ways by which the audience can be attracted and profit made for the theatre. Publicity creates a cost free avenue for the Nigeria theatre to achieve awareness. The Nigerian theatre has never lacked practitioners whether professional or academic, what is now required is adequate patronage in order to sustain the profit making of the theatre. Publicity is more beneficial to the theatre than advertising since publicity is free while advertisements are paid for. This benefit of publicity cannot be over emphasized because it reduces expenses at the same time as it generates enough goodwill through the credibility of the medium in which it appears.

Attracting patrons for the theatre requires an interjection into the daily activities of people. To succeed in this, the benefits of the theatre must be projected to the people through the media they reckon as being credible. Theatre publicity has gone beyond the level of creating awareness through drums and songs outside the theatre building. This idea is not totally discarded though since it can still attract some audience; however, it is limited to the potential audience who reside in the vicinity of the theatre.

The theatre as an organization must make deliberate efforts to create a two-way communication between itself and its publics. It must also seek to establish mutual understanding between itself and its publics. The first major set of publics that the theatre must relate with is its community. When the theatre becomes responsible to its society by communicating effectively to them then it exist for their sake, the members of the community will in turn respond to the theatre.

The more the theatrical experience is left behind closed doors, the more the public will be oblivious of it. it is only what the publics are aware of that they create interest in, and it is only what they are interested in that they seek. Nigeria, more than other countries, needs the relieve that the

theatre offers due to the level of stress experienced by people in the execution of their daily activities. Hence, the theatre must be presented to them as a stress-relieve option.

Basic Marketing and Publicity Principles

Since the theatre is also out to make profit aside its other functions, it must compete favourably in the market place for both the attention and the resources of its patrons. The following are some of the principles that can enhance the effective publicity of the theatre in Nigeria.

1. **Mission Statement:** The mission statement is also commonly referred to as a Central proposition. According to Chambers (2002), the mission statement acts as an aspirational as well as inspirational yardstick against which all publicity activities of an organization can be assessed. The theatre must establish an achievable and realistic publicity goal to work towards. The goal or mission statement will also enhance the measurement of the progress or success of the publicity campaign.
2. **Business Plan:** The business plan is a strategic and sequential statement of a business idea. According to Chambers (2002), the creation of the necessary strategy for effective publicity must evolve from the organization's evaluation of its strength, weakness, opportunities and threats. The Nigerian theatre must evaluate its strength so as to identify its marketable qualities. It must also consider its weaknesses so as to underplay them through the use of publicity or even find a permanent solution to them. In order to determine the opportunities of the theatre, a clear evaluation of the potential audience must be done, while considering the threats to the theatre involves putting into consideration the challenges posed by technological advancement.
3. **Choice of Media:** Media selection is about the most important step in the achievement of publicity. Having stated in the definition of publicity that it involves the communication of information about an organization, product or idea free of charge, it becomes pertinent therefore to emphasize the need for the media to be carefully selected. Another reason why the selection of the media is important is the publicity earns its credibility from the medium in which it is placed. Among the media that are available for theatre publicity are:
 - (a) **Newspapers:** According to Carroll. N. (2006), "one of the best ways to get free publicity for your theatre production is through the arts pages of newspapers..." He further explains that the art pages

of newspapers reach whoever buys the paper on a regular basis. The publicity manager of the theatre must ensure that the news release he sends to each newspaper suits the requirement of the relevant editor.

- (b) **Interview:** The publicity manager of the theatre can also organize with media houses to have interviews scheduled with actors, dancers or musicians that are involved in the production.
- (c) **Picture stories:** Pictures of important and captivating scenes of the production can be sent to appropriate sections of relevant newspapers so as to generate some awareness. Pictures of star actors can also be included.
- (d) **Media Invitation:** According to Carroll (2006), "the publicity manager should always send the art editor a personal opening night invitation..." He says that determined but polite publicists have helped to get ambitious amateur production as much coverage as a professional one.
- (e) **The Internet:** Since the world has become a global village as a result of the advent of Information and Communication Technology, it has become essential that the Nigerian theatre should advance beyond the limitations of physical boundaries by developing web sites for its activities. Internet always access the site and be enlightened concerning what the theatre has to offer. This also helps to introduce the Nigeria theatre to the international market.

Critical Observations and Suggestions

The theatre in Nigeria has not been given a befitting place in the lives of the people. In fact, it appears as though it has been relegated to the background. This status can be partly blamed on the attitudes of some theatre practitioners who underestimate the power of publicity. It is sometimes assumed that the audience are not attracted to the theatre because of the quality of productions it offers, whereas, the situation is probably as a result of ineffective of adhoc publicity.

It has also been observed that most seasoned theatre practitioner, except perhaps those who are academics, have almost completely abandoned the stage for home video. This development is probably as a result of the higher profit and fame that film offers. It is however noteworthy that intensive publicity is usually undertaken for those home videos engendering the high patronage. If the theatre is publicized in like manner, there will definitely be a turn around. Through publicity, home video has gradually become a part of the daily lives of Nigerians. On the other hand,

the life theatre, if ever considered, is reserved for special occasions. This is not good for the theatre because it can not survive only on the resources generated during occasions.

In light of the above observations, the following suggestions are made to enhance the theatre profitability in Nigeria.

1. Publicity should not be seen as just another one of the elements of the theatre, rather, it should be allowed to function as a full fledged arm of the theatre which will be responsible for the marketing of its products.
2. The theatre should market its strengths and not its weakness. In spite of the comfort provided by technology, the theatre still has its unique attributes. These attributes include the privilege of experiencing live performances and also to see celebrant artistes off the screen.
3. The theatre should determine its target audience for each production. This will aid its selection of the appropriate media outlet that will suit its desired audience.
4. Efforts should be made to institute an effective feedback system that will enable the theatre in Nigeria to understand the peculiarities of its audience and their unique expectations. This knowledge is highly essential for the profitability of the theatre since audience satisfaction will engender an increased patronage.
5. Finally, the theatre should not reckon technology as a foe; rather, it should use the facilities to its advantage by exploring the great possibilities they present for its publicity campaigns.

Conclusion

The Nigerian theatre has energized over the years as a dynamic movement; nevertheless, it has not arrived at its destination yet. Further efforts must be made to make Nigerian more aware of what it has to offer. The more people become aware of the theatre and its potentials, the more they will desire the experience. The more they desire the experience, the more they are likely to visit the theatre; hence the profitability of the Nigerian theatre will become a reality.

Note

1. For more information on the *Guide to Good Theatre Publicity in the Press* by Carroll, N. (2006), see www.messengerneswpaper.htm

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