



**STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND AGRICULTURAL
DEVELOPMENT: MOBILIZING RURAL FARMERS**

David Okonkwo C

Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

Abstract: This study investigated public relations strategies for mobilizing rural farmers for agricultural development. In carrying out this investigation, four specific objectives and four research questions were formulated. Two theories guided this study. They are: diffusion of innovation and two-steps theories. Survey research design was adopted for the study. Population of study comprised all agricultural science students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt which according to available record at faculty office is 120. A sample size of 30 students was drawn using simple random sampling technique. A 12-item questionnaires were employed as research instrument. Finding show that; all the public relations strategic employed in mobilizing farmers for agricultural development are vital and relevant; that “words of mouth” by opinion leaders is the most effective public relations strategy; that to a very great extent, public relations strategies can enhance rural farmers’ productivity and efficiency. It was recommended among others that a combination of mass media channels and “words of mouth” by opinion leaders be employed in conveying persuasive messages meant for rural farmers; “words of mouth” by opinion leaders should be given a top priority among other public relations strategies for rural farmers.

Key words: Public Relations, Public Relations Strategies, Rural Farmers, Agriculture and Development

Introduction

One of the top priorities of every government is how to provide sufficient food for its people. The establishment of a stable, safe and enabling environment or development in any nation could be dependent on provision of sufficient food supply (Nwabueze, 2007). The process of providing sufficient food supply in a country is what food supply entails, and this is dependent on agricultural growth and development. As noted by Ukeje (2004), the problem of food supply is an integral status and is closely tied to demographic growth and improving ecological processes. This implies that establishment and assurance of food security through agricultural development is central to the overall growth and development of a nation. Agriculture is central to the achievement of food security. It is the largest sector of the economy, providing over 60 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the late fifties which has dropped to about 40 percent in the last two decades (Uzoh, 2005). The shifting of attention to oil producing sector of the economy led to a retarded growth of agricultural and food production and food insecurity in the country (Nwabueze 2007). The headache of different nations of the world is how to feed

their increasing population through agriculture. Though, mechanized farming has taken root in some of these nations, especially the so called developed ones, it is still alien in the developing or the under-developed nations where majority of the people still live in rural communities and engages in subsistence farming. In these nations, the topical issue is development especially in the area of agriculture. The leaders want to change or improve the standard of living of the people who gave them the 'mandate' to lead. Since food is one of the basic necessities of life, and it is said that no one will be a patriot in an empty stomach. Despite the exploits of the mass media, Nyamnjoh (2001) asserts that Africa currently remains on the sideline of information superhighway, therefore would for many years to come, rely on the traditional media of communication to reach majority of her people. However, Nyamnjoh (2001) while recognizing the importance of the oramedia, still suggests that the new communication technology would be integrated into the African indigenous communication system for more sustainable development. The reason is obvious. According to Ugbajah (1985) in Nyamnjoh (2001), the oramedia are highly distinctive and credible unlike the electronic media which can be elitist, mighty, vicarious and urban. Ugbajah added that the distinctive feature of the traditional media is their capacity to speak to the common man in his language and idioms, and in dealing with the problem that are directly relevant to his situation. Nyamnjoh writes: "Ideas, information and knowledge can be effectively transmitted using indigenous forms of communication, which are characterized by simplicity of technology and directness of interaction. In this case, communication takes place in a very non-artificial milieu. Gestures, body language, facial expression, symbols and folklore are predominant in indigenous communication." Experience in different traditional communities has shown that indigenous forms of communication are always effective in dispelling the superstitious beliefs which are usually the stock-in-trade of various rural communities and often affect the acceptability of some of the information that emanate from the mass media. These superstitious beliefs, archaic perceptions and unscientific attitudes that people have inherited as part of their culture are always difficult to modify or dispel (Agbanu, 2007). However, to achieve this, practitioners of the traditional media use a subtle form of persuasion to achieve an attitudinal change. Examples abound where local songs, dramas etc are used even by the media to promote agricultural reforms or other development campaigns (Uzoh, 2005). Despite the efficacy of the traditional media in the rural communities, the disparity in communication resources and facilities in the urban and rural communities made their use inevitable. According to MacBride et al. (2001), "Overall national data to demonstrate imbalance and discrepancies are, however, very fragmentary, but simple observation and deduction from certain available data are enough to prove the point. It is well known that more expensive media, like television receivers, are in many countries concentrated in towns. There are developing countries where TV receivers cover only the main cities and the immediate surroundings. Hundreds of thousands of villagers have not a simple telephone, the existing networks being for urban population." As noted by media scholars like Onyekosor (2014); Nwamkpa and Onyekosor (2015), there is a nexus between communication media and the capacity or depth of messages they can disseminate. This is also subject to the capacity of the audience or recipients of such messages to receive and convert the received messages to their advantage.

Statement of the Problem

Communication is vital for mobilizing individuals in society for important development tasks. It helps to create awareness and also enhances cultural and social integration. An aspect of communication concerned with disseminating information about agricultural activities is referred to as agricultural communication. Public

relations strategies are some of the tools employed by agricultural communicators in achieving purpose of mobilizing and disseminating vital agricultural information to the rural farmers. Among these public relations strategies are the main stream channels of communication such as radio, television, newspapers, film, bill boards, postal and the oral communication (“person-to-person”) kind of communication. Based on the peculiarity of rural farmers, especially with the nature of their geographical location, level of educational literacy and economic well-being, it become imperative that agricultural communicators must understand the best channels of communication to pass vital information to the rural farmer. This is the crux of this study. This study therefore set out to investigate the public relations strategies for mobilizing rural farmers for agricultural development.

Objectives of the Study

The study set out to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify the public relations strategies for mobilizing rural farmers for agricultural development.
2. To establish the most efficient public relations strategy for mobilizing rural farmers for agricultural development.
3. To ascertain the extent to which these public relations strategies can help in mobilizing rural farmers for agricultural development.
4. To ascertain the extent to which public relations strategies can enhance rural farmer’s productivity and efficiency.

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated for the study:

1. What are the public relations strategies used in mobilizing farmers for agricultural development?
2. Which is the most effective public relations strategy for mobilizing rural farmers for agricultural development?
3. To what extent can public relations strategies help in mobilizing rural farmers for agricultural development?
4. To what extent can public relations strategies enhance rural farmers’ productivity and efficiency?

Conceptual Review

The Rural Dwellers

In every human society, there are three forms of settlement- urban, sub-urban and rural. This classification can further be sub-divided through the density of the population, provision of basic infrastructure and the standard of living (Nkala, 2000). Basically, the urban centers boast of larger population density, social infrastructure and better standard of living. On the other hand, the rural communities are made up of people living in areas that have low population and are engaged in subsistence agriculture (Nkala, 2000). To those people generally referred to as the rural dwellers, city life only exists in their imagination.

Development: An Overview

The word development means different things to different people. Yet, the converging point remains that it is a positive advancement whether in tangible or intangible things. To the economist, development has its central focus on economic growth measured in aggregate and verifiable terms. Hence, a country is said to be developed when its per capita income, gross national product and annual rate of growth satisfy a set of economic condition (Nwodu, 2003). Another school of thought sees development as economic growth plus positive social change.

But, one of the definitions which most people are in sympathy with was provided by the controversial West Indian

scholar, Walter Rodney in his controversial book. "How Europe Underdeveloped Africa". According to Rodney (1985), development is 'a many sided process. At the level of the individual, it implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being. The achievement of any of these aspects of personal developments are very much tied with the state of the society. The British Economist, Dudley Sears tried to improve on Rodney's definition. For Sear, development involves the creation of opportunities for the realization of human potentials. According to Sear, the questions to ask about a country's development are: what has happened to poverty? What has been happening to agricultural development? What has been happening to unemployment? What has been happening to inequality? He states that if all these have declined, then, beyond doubt, the country concerned is in the path of development. But, if one or two of these have been growing worse, it would be strange to call the result 'development' even if per capita income doubled (Sear, 1996, In Nwodu, 2003).

Mobilizing for Development

In different parts of the world and localities, policy makers continually grope through multiple programmers to fathom human predicament and redeem man from chaos and disorder. This, they try to achieve through different strategies. However, the crisis point remains the linkage between the policy articulation, implementation and the target or the end users. Nkala (2000) describes this as a tragedy. According to him, for government to think without communicating, for government to articulate sound policies without reaching the target audience is a tragedy'. After all, the main thrust of development is nothing more than mobilizing the diverse human and material resources to transform the physical environment for the betterment of the people. And, development cannot exist without communication (Wilson, 2006). Mobilization here means to rally for a purpose or gather together for service or a process of achieving a goal through organized group action (Okafor, 2005). Akonobi (1990) cited in Nwosu (2009) had emphasized that, if rural development has in the past been that slow and so produced little result, then, the rural machinery or agent for development must be faulty. What this implies is that for any rural development programmer to be functional and meaningful, it must be oriented towards the people. The rural folk must have effective participation in the decision making process of that programmer. As a result of this, development sequence further highlights the need for policy implementers to engage in an intensive mobilization process if they have to still wet the grounds for active and purposeful community participation. This could not be done through compulsion, but through a well-articulated and intensive mobilization programmer which recognizes the right of the people and their feelings. And above all, the employment of public relations strategies to ensure free and active participation. This view expressed by Akonobi is contained in the early work of Nwuneli (1985). He opines that while social change is desirable, social development programmers can easily run into problems if they are not effectively communicated to the people. The position of these authors is not far from the truth taking into cognizance the position of Nwodu (2003) who describes development communication as the overall deliberate effort to acquaint target audience of development messages. He writes: "The primary motive of embarking on development communication is to create adequate awareness about the development projects meant to enhance the well-being of the inhabitants of a given society and by so doing, sensitize their adoption of the project."

Mass Media and Rural Development

Development campaigns in different parts of the world (both developed and developing) have continued to point out that communication is central to rural development. In Nigeria for instance, different developmental projects embarked upon by the government either failed or succeeded due to the level of media involvement. In reference to this, Nwosu (2009) state that Nigeria has produced a typical example of an ad-mixture of media campaign failures and successes in rural development and overall social mobilization. Buttressing this, Nwabueze (2007) laments that though the Nigeria government comes up with developmental policies, programmers and projects, from time to time, the success or otherwise of such effort is largely determined by the ability to educate the rural dwellers and mobilize them for the success of such programmers, policies or projects. As a result of this, the systematic and effective utilization of the media for rural development has remained topic among policy makers, implementers and in academic circles. But, the general belief remains that when properly understood and applied, the media can play positive role in mobilizing the rural dwellers for both rural and national development especially in the area of agriculture when public relations strategies are employed. Nigeria rural dwellers have proved to produce a good followership if only the leaders can strike the right chord. Example about. Wilson (2003) contends that the Nigeria society is ready to be mobilized in order to participate in good causes. According to him, “the society, though not stable, is conscious of those things that it can do to strengthen the socio-cultural, economic and political structures but it had laid in wait for a committed leader. It seems quite obvious that if a leader emerges which, in the public view is seen to be committed to the people’s development, it would be quite easy for such leadership to mobilize the people for whatever cause it deems to be in their interest.

Agricultural Development in Nigeria: An Overview

The problem of food security in Nigeria, just like in most Sub-Saharan African Countries, is increasing at an alarming rate. Agriculture which is central to assurance of food security is relegated, with oil exports receiving priority attention. This has invariably affected the achievement of food self-sufficiency in which case households do not have access to enough food to take care of themselves. With the attendant poverty in nations, constraint on achievement of food sufficiency is fast becoming the order of the day. Ukeje (2004) identified the problem of agriculture in Nigeria as follows: Inadequacies in the supply and delivery of farm inputs ; shortages of working capital; low rate of technology adoption; disease and pests infestations; poor harvest, processing and storage technology; environmental hazards; land constraints, low level of education, and communal/religious crises.

Inadequate Supply of Farm Inputs: This has to do with unavailability of farm inputs that are essential for agricultural production at the right time and price. Such inputs include: fertilizers, seeds, agro-chemicals, machineries, among others.

Inadequate Working Capital: The unavailability of adequate farmers to expand technological input and boost productivity as a result of inadequate working capital poses agricultural problem in the nations.

Inadequate Capital Expenditure: The low volume of capital allocation and expenditure on agriculture affects effective implementation of projects that improve this sector and ensure agricultural development.

Low Rate of Technology Adoption: Removal of subsidies on agricultural machinery (tractor, harvesters, harrowers and planters) has reduced adoption of relevant technology for the improvement of the sector which is central to attainment of agricultural development. This has made it difficult for farmers especially small-scale farmers to cope with market oriented food production expectations.

Environmental Hazards: Soil erosion, drought/desertification which are often caused by overgrazing, over-cultivation, bush burning, deforestation, among other natural causes, affect agricultural development in Nigeria, thereby posing food security problem in Nigeria, and inadequate agric-produce export.

Post-Harvest Loses: This is largely brought about by problem of inadequate storage facilities, including dearth of agro-processing industries in Nigeria.

Low Level of Education: This entails failure to adopt modern farming techniques by farmers as a result of lack of inputs in fertilizer seeds, agro-chemicals, machineries, among others.

Communal /Religious Crises: This poses a problem to agricultural development, as these occur during planting, weeding or harvesting seasons, including the plight of farmers from their areas due to crises. These problems of food security as put forward by Ukeje (2004) capture the scenario in Nigeria. These problems are also obtainable in other Sub-Saharan African nations in view of the fact that the problem of agricultural development cuts across this area almost with the same degree of magnitude. Against this backdrop, it is not in doubt that the problem of agriculture needs urgent attention in Nigeria. Pinstrip-Anderson et al (2000) observe that “in Sub-Saharan Africa, 210 million or 39 percent of its people are malnourished” And that food insecurity in Africa is expected to increase over the next decade (which is now being far spent). This observation which affects Nigeria, further buttresses the need for concerted efforts to be made towards ensuring a boost in Nigerian agricultural sector. It has been observed that the stability and development of any nation is greatly hinged on food security which undoubtedly comes through agricultural development. What should occupy priority position in the minds of government and other change agents should be how to achieve or ensure agricultural development in the nation in view of its ripple-effect on other sectors.

Overview of Public Relations

Public relations is a strategic conversation. As one might imagine, it is an ephemeral and wideranging field, often misperceived, and because of the lack of message control inherent in public relations, it is difficult to master. Public relations is even difficult to define. The public relations function is prevalent and growing; the fragmentation of media and growth of multiple message sources means that public relations is on the ascent while traditional forms of mass communication (such as newspapers) are on the decline (Cheney & Christensen, 2001). Public relations can be found in virtually every industry, government, and non-profit organization. Its broad scope makes it impossible to understand without some attention to the taxonomy of this diverse and dynamic profession (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2002). Among the many competing definitions of public relations, Grunig and Hunt's is the most widely cited definitions of public relations: they defined public relations is “the management of communication between an organization and its publics” (Grunig & Hunt, 1984 in Fawkes, 2004). One reason this definition is so successful is its parsimony, or using few words to convey much information. It also lays down the foundation of the profession squarely within management, as opposed to the competing approaches of journalism or the promotion-based approach of marketing and advertising that focuses primarily on consumers. The component parts of Grunig and Hunt's famous definition of public relations are as follows (Fawkes, 2004):

- **Management:** The body of knowledge on how best to coordinate the activities of an enterprise to achieve effectiveness.
- **Communication:** Not only sending a message to a receiver but also understanding the messages of others through listening and dialogue.

- **Organization:** Any group organized with a common purpose; in most cases, it is a business, a corporation, a governmental agency, or a non-profit group.
- **Publics:** Any group(s) of people held together by a common interest. They differ from audiences in that they are often self-organized and do not have to attune to messages; publics differ from stakeholders in that they do not necessarily have a financial stake tying them to specific goals or consequences of the organization. Targeted audiences, on the other hand, are publics who receive a specifically targeted message that is tailored to their interests. As the management of communication between an organization and its publics, public relations has radically departed from its historical roots in publicity and journalism to become a management discipline that is, one based on research and strategy (Fawkes, 2004).

Public Relations Approaches in Mobilizing for Agricultural Development

While advocating the use of public relations strategies to ensure the success of development communication, Lattimore Dan et al. (2004) state that public relations practitioners in communication use five basic steps in the process of diffusing information to facilitate the adoption of new ideas by target publics. These are: awareness, interest, evolution, trials and adoption. They state that process of diffusion must be planned and executed for each target public separately, and advised policy or programmer implementers to plan actions appropriate to the needs and interest of each public. Uzoh (2005) opines that to mobilize the rural dwellers for agricultural development, they must be made to appreciate the various benefits from agriculture. This he argues could be done by the use of Frank Jefkins' transfer model which has the acronym HAPI, where H stand for hostility, A for Apathy; P for prejudice and I for Ignorance. With effective plan, the hostility can be changed to friendliness; apathy to interest; prejudice to acceptance and ignorance to awareness. The fact remains that for some obvious reasons, the rural dwellers receive some of the products of the mass or modern media of communication with skepticism. Having lost confidence in some of the leaders, they see nothing good in them not even the media campaign which the leaders often use to propagate some of the development programmers. As a result of this, for efficacy in mobilization particularly for agricultural participation, Wilson (2003) advocates the use of one of the public relations strategies which is persuasion and sustained propaganda. Persuasion here means the ability to change the mind of people who already have their minds made up about an idea, a product etc. sometimes, it may be to reinforce or modify the opinion of an audience who already think the way you want them to, but are not firmly committed to that way of thinking. So, persuasion means the ability to reinforce or modify the opinion of people about an idea or a course of action (Fab-Ukozor, 2005). In the contrary, Eyita (2003), states that a situation where programmers are imposed on the people leads to passivity and apathy. He laments that previous efforts to integrate the rural populace into national programmers had consistently failed because emphasis were placed on telling and teaching, rather than on exchange of ideas and requests. According to him: "The people must be made to realize that for a better Nigeria to evolve, they must contribute. It must be remembered that national or rural development through social mobilization will come, not from force but from a process of discussion and persuasion." Buttressing this, Cutlip, Center, and Broom, (2006) suggest that to achieve the desired effect while mobilizing people, communicators should move from the early communication models of Shannon and Weaver because of its linear nature and the attendant defects. Again, communication should be a reciprocal process of exchanging signals to inform, instruct, or persuade based on shared meanings. To them, this is public relations, and has a great role to play in promoting agricultural participation. Though the process of informing/communication involves

such steps as: achieving acceptance of the communication, achieving acceptance of the message, having it interpreted as intended, and getting the message stored for later use; the process of persuasion goes beyond that, it involves accepting change; yielding to the wishes or point of view of the sender, hence, the essence of mobilization, and subsequently, the success in agricultural development. Therefore, to achieve the desired effect, effort should be made to ensure that those who deliver this information are credible in the eyes of the people. It is only through that, that the message they convey can also be seen to be credible. After all, the medium is the message. Much of the theory about public relations especially when it involves mobilization for development rests on the idea that to change attitude, one must first change opinion. And, to change opinion, persuasion comes into play. In other words, for public relations to achieve the desired effect, it must attain a certain level of acceptance and credibility, often times, these are so easy to aspire, but not easy to achieve (Sengupta, 2005). Persuasion here is not coercion, insistence or issuing orders even when they are not necessary. It means using different public relations strategies to identify who the target audience is, their belief, attitude, likes and dislikes among others. With this idea, information will be packaged in such a way as to appeal to them and touch them at the point of their needs. According to Sengupta (2005), the word 'persuade' which has its root in Latin refers to something that is sweet and agreeable; so, for effective mobilization, the people have to be coerced into believing in a cause which they would have rejected if a different method was used. Sengupta, (2005) in his abridged version states that the problem which communicators encounter while delivering their message could be answered bearing in mind this model- who? Says what? To whom? On which channel? And with what effect? For policy makers to know that the idea they sell to the people is making impact, the people must be driving the change process themselves. Nwosu (2000) sets out guidelines or model which ranks the elements of PR communication. These are: audience, objective, motivation, researched planning, understandable presentation, medium selection and technique. Using Nwosu's model as a guide, he states that the first task in the PR communication process is to identify and understand the target audience. This also involves knowing their world view, attitude, likes and dislikes etc so as to package a message that will appeal to them. This is done through audience research which not only identifies the target audience but reveals all other things about them. Therefore, agricultural messages packaged in such a way that would appeal to the rural dwellers and solicit their support and participation should be worked out by public relations personnel. Done with the audience, the next thing is the definition of the communication/message objective in relation to the identified problem at hand. This should be supported with an in-built motivation factor in the communication process to appeal to them. This motivation is the driving forces that will elicit a change in their attitude, thinking and behavior. Here, public relations personnel must ensure that messages that are not only appealing but also motivating be given to the rural dwellers to sustain their interest and participation in agriculture. As already noted, research plays an important part in the public relations communication. Mobilizing a people for a change is not an exception. This is based on the common sense knowledge that one can more easily get to where he is going, if he knows where he is going, if he knows his route from the onset. What is needed here is a conscious collection of relevant facts, opinions and ideas connected with a communication problem before embarking on it. Good planning always helps programmer executors or campaigners to achieve effective presentation of their message in an understandable manner. The saying that the medium is the message has a vital role to play here. All efforts put into preparing a message will come to naught or be wasted if such message could not be delivered to the public through an ideal medium. The point being

emphasized here is that careful selection of media and the employment of adequate techniques that will achieve the desired result is imperative. It is therefore, pertinent to note that we should be able to find effective ways of combining the potentials of these oramedia modes with the mass media modes of communication which has the well-known advantage of availability and scaling language barrier.

Interpersonal/Oramedia Communication

Interpersonal or oramedia are the common means of communication that remain what essentially sustains the information needs of the population in rural communities. Interpersonal media refers to conventional means of communication as practiced by various global communities and cultures from ancient times. Folk media and words of mouth are some of the most vibrant representations of interpersonal media because they reflect communication channels for, by, and of the common people of a society or region (Aikat, 2014). Interpersonal media are effective and important part of the communication system. Indeed, interpersonal media is culturally based as it is natural with the tradition and customs of the people. These media are a source of popular entertainment for the rural audience, in addition to providing instruction and information. Our country, Nigeria has a rich heritage of folk arts, folk dance, folk tales, epics, ballads and plays that can be used for development work (Aikat, 2014). Indeed, interpersonal media is highly effective in the dissemination of information among the African people. Folk media are some of the most vibrant forms of interpersonal media. Throughout the world, folk media refers to communication channels for, by and of the common people of a society or region. Folk media are representative of a interpersonal way of life based on customs, beliefs and arts that make up a distinctive culture. Folk media draw upon people past, present and future, providing them with glimpses of reality that result in education and entertainment. In rural areas and developing nations, folk media represent the masses of people most deprived of specific messages. Thus, folk media covers a wide range of interpersonal communication channels, including storytelling, street theatre, songs and dance (Allen, 2015).

Modern Media

Modern media refer specifically to present times and also forms of communication that are new. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the term was used to refer to the invention and application of new techniques in the media (Allen, 2015). Modern media include content available on-demand through the internet, the mass media (print and broadcast) accessible on any digital and analog devices, usually containing interactive user feedback and creative participation. Common examples of new media include websites such as online newspapers, blogs, social media etc. Modern Media transmit content through connection and conversation. It enables people around the world to share, comment on, and discuss a wide variety of topics.

Public Relations Strategies

The media of public relations according to Nwosu (1996) can simply be described as the channels or strategies through which the public relations messages of any organization are communicated to its various publics. These strategies include the mass media which are used to reaching out to the external publics of the organization. They include; newspapers and magazines also known as the print media, radio, television, film, and the internet which is also known as electronic media, or audio-visual. The other media of public relations include bill boards, banners, fliers, oral media forms or words of mouth (e.g. meetings, public lectures, etc). These various strategies according to Nwosu (1996) has special peculiarities and characteristics, some positive, while others are negative. The public relations practitioner must know how to use these strategies appropriately. The positive aspects of

these public relations strategies constitute the strengths of public relations media involved, while the negative characteristics constitute their weaknesses. The electronic media for instance have the positive attributes of speed generally. In addition to speed, television has the strength of combining sound with pictures, and even colour to send messages. Radio on the other hand is a medium of sound only. Television and radio use the technique of repetition to ensure that the messages get to as many audience as possible. The disadvantage side of both radio and television are that they are: time bound, they are expensive, and transient meaning that their messages are not permanent or are difficult to store for future use. The print media (newspapers, magazines) are called permanent media because their messages once printed are permanent as such could be referred to again and again by readers. Their negative attribute is that they are considered dull, cold and requires high level of literacy to be able to read and comprehend print media messages. Oral media forms such as town hall meetings, lectures, public speeches and one-on-one discussion has advantage of immediate feedback. Nwosu (1996) advised that public relations managers as well as communicators, should be able to understand or know how to balance the strength and weaknesses of various public relations strategies in drawing up their media plans for his public relations project or programmers. This considerations should be in tandem with target audience such as rural farmers.

Theoretical Framework

Two theories are imperative to this study. They are: Diffusion of innovation and two-steps theories. **Diffusion of Innovation Theory**

Onyekosor and Yeibo (2024, p.7) opined that “the diffusion of innovation theory as elaborated by Everett Roger (1962; 1983) is the most influential modernization theory”, a position strongly held by Srampickel (2007). Diffusion of innovation according to Severin and Tankard (1992) is concerned with how innovations, practices, objects etc become known and are spread throughout a social system. One of the most influential diffusion studies of all times dealt with the diffusion of hybrid seed corn among Iowa farmers by Ryan and Gross (1943), cited in (Severin & Tankard, 1992; Anaeto, Onabajo & Osifeso, 2008). The innovation received by Iowa farmers in 1928, resulted in agricultural innovations for more than 20 years and a major boost in farm productivity. The Ryan and Gross study therefore formed the classical diffusion paradigm. This study by Ryan and Gross (1943) is related to the present study.

The following steps were taken by the researchers in the study.

1. Some 259 farmers were interviewed to ascertain when and how they adopted hybrid seed corn and to obtain information about them and their farm operations.
2. The rate of adoption was plotted over time.
3. Farmers were assigned to adopt categories based on time of adoption of the new seed corn.
4. Various communication channels were identified as playing different roles in the innovation decision process. Rogers (1983, p.15-16) categorized the characteristics of an innovation that affect their rate of adoption as follows:
 1. Relative advantage – this has to do with the degree to which an innovation is perceived as better than the idea it supersedes.
 2. Compatibility – the degree to which an innovation is perceived as being consistent with the existing values, past experiences, and needs of potential adopter.
 3. Complexity – the degree to which an innovation is perceived as difficult to understand and use.

4. Trial ability – the degree to which an innovation may be experimented with on a limited basis.
5. Observability – the degree to which the results of an innovation are visible to others. Rogers added that “in general, innovations that are perceived by receivers as having greater advantage, compatibility, trial ability, and less complexity will be adopted more rapidly than other innovations” (1993, p.16).

According to Rogers (1993) cited in Anaeto et al. (2008, p.117), the innovation decision process is a mental process which an individual or other unit making decision passes. The process consists of four stages:

1. Knowledge – exposure to an innovation and some understanding of how it functions;
2. Persuasion – formation of an attitude towards the innovation.
3. Decision – activity resulting in a choice to adopt or reject the innovation.
4. Implementation – putting the innovation to use; and conformation – reinforcement or reversal of the innovation decision made. Rogers (1995, p.263-266) also specifies five adopter categories, classifying individuals of other decision-making units in their rate of adoption of an innovation:

1. Innovators – ventures one; eager to try new ideas, more cosmopolite relationships than their peers.
2. Early adopters – respectable localities, usually highest degree of opinion leadership within social system.
3. Early majority – deliberate, interact frequently with their peers but seldom hold leadership position.
4. Late majority – sceptical; often adopt an innovation because of economic necessity or increasing network pressure.
5. Laggards – traditional, most locality, many are near-isolates, point of reference is the past.

Change agents are important in diffusion of innovation. A change agent according to Severin and Tankard (2008, p.200) “is a professional person who attempts to influence adoption decisions in a direction that he or she feels desirable”. The persons (change agents) usually have more education and status than these they are trying to influence, making them heterophilous from their clients. Change agents could be salespeople, and dealers in new products, representatives of new farm equipment or improved seeds like hybrid seed corn, technical assistance workers in developing nations and others whose job is to link individuals in social systems together. Communication channels for diffusion of innovation may either be interpersonal or mass media (Severin & Tankard, 2008). These channels play different roles in diffusion process. For instance, the mass media channels, newspapers, magazines, radio, TV and film reach large audiences rapidly spread information and set agenda for society. While interpersonal channel such as person to person communication by opinion leaders or change agents provide a two-way exchange in communication between the sender(s) and receiver(s). As such are more effective than the mass media in dealing with resistance or apathy on the part of the receiver. In the process of diffusion of innovation as opined by Severin and Tankard (2008) the mass media channels are more important at the knowledge stage, whereas the interpersonal channels are relatively more effective at the persuasion stage. Also, mass media channels are more result oriented for earlier adopters than for late adopters.

Two-Steps Theory

This theory was propounded by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet in 1940. Having studied the impact of mass communicated presidential election campaign in the Erie County, Ohio, United States of America on voters, Lazarsfeld, et al. concluded in the study that “Ideas often flow from radio and print media to opinion leaders and from these to less active sections of the population”. The two-step flow theory according to Anaeto, et al. (2008, p.117) states that “mass media effects are shaped by existing social relationships as well as rival (or

other alternative media) sources of information and power”. This theory assumes that mass media messages move first to relatively well informed individuals (opinion leaders) who frequently receive mass media messages and then flow to individuals who had less exposure and rely on the opinion leaders for their information through interpersonal channels. The opinion leaders as observed by Anaeto et al. (2008) became recognized as additional intervening variables between the mass mediated message and audience response. Opinion leaders in this cases are able to perform this role because they are more exposed to the mass media and other channels of communication; they tend to belong to several organizations; they tend to enjoy a higher socio-economic status to personify most of the norms and values of their “opinion followers”. The two-step flow theory was later modified into multi-steps or N-step flow theory, since opinion leaders also have opinion leaders and so on and infinito. Folarin (1998) added that two-steps theory seems to be useful and relevant in predominantly non-literate societies like the rural areas in most part of Nigeria and other developing societies of the world in which access to information is circumscribed by several factors such as political, economic and socio-cultural. The diffusion of innovation and two-steps theories will guide this study and will help in providing understanding on how best to apply both the mass media channels and interpersonal public relations strategies in mobilizing rural farmers for agricultural development.

Methodology

This study used the descriptive survey method. Wimmer and Dominick (2003) cited in Onyekosor (2014, p.31) explained that “a descriptive survey attempts to document current conditions or attitude. That is, to describe what exists at the moment.” Survey has the advantage of collecting and analysing data of a small number of the population and generalizing it to the entire population. Study population comprised all agricultural science students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt which according to available record at the faculty office is 120. From this population, a sample size of 30 respondents was drawn using random sampling technique as recommended by Akogun (2004, p.86); Onyekosor and Yeibo (2024) that a “descriptive survey should have a sample size that is not less than 30 if the size of the population is small.” A well designed 12-item copies of questionnaire were employed as research instrument. To ensure validity of instrument, research colleagues evaluated the instrument to check for content relevance, sequence of questions, clarity and structure of the questionnaire. Reliability was however achieved by administering eight (8) copies of study questionnaire on Higher National Diploma (HND) Agricultural Science Conversion students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt. Responses generated from the respondents were used to scrutinize the instrument. Collected data were analysed through frequency tables and simple percentages.

Data Presentation

Table 1: Percentage response to Public Relations Strategies for Mobilizing Rural Farmers for Agricultural Development.

Public Relation Strategies	No. of Respondents	% of Respondents
Demonstration on TV	5	17
Radio jingles/Discussion	4	13
Billboards	2	7
Words of mouth by opinion leaders	3	10
All of the above	3	53
	16	

Total	30	100
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Data in Table 1 shows that all the strategies listed in the table – demonstration on TV, radio jingles and discussion, billboard and words of mouth by opinion leaders are vital public relations strategies for mobilizing rural farmers for agricultural development.

Table 2: The most Effective Public Relations Strategy for Mobilizing Rural Farmers for Agricultural Development

Public Relation Strategies	No. of Respondents	% of Respondents
Demonstration on TV	6	20
Radio jingles/Discussion	4	13.7
Billboards	2	6.0
Words of mouth by opinion leaders	18	60
None of the above	0	0
Total	30	100

The table above shows that majority of respondents believe that words of mouth by opinion leaders is the most effective public relations strategy for mobilizing rural farmers for agricultural development. This is followed by demonstration on TV, radio jingle and billboard.

Table 3: Respondent Opinion on the Extent Public Relations Strategies can help Mobilize Rural Farmers for Agricultural Development

Suitability	No. of Respondents	% of Respondents
Very suitable	17	57
Suitable	7	23
Not very suitable	3	10
Not suitable	2	7
Undecided	1	3
Total	30	100

From Table 3, responses from respondents indicated that public relations strategies are very suitable for mobilizing rural farmers for agricultural development.

Table 4: Percentage Responses to the extent to which Public Relation Strategies can Enhance Rural Farmers Productivity and Efficiency

Responses	No. of Respondents	% of Respondents
A very great extent	16	53
A great extent	8	27
Not a very great extent	4	13
Not a great extent	2	7
Total	30	100

Table 4 shows responses to the extent to which public relations strategies can enhance rural farmer's productivity and efficiency. Responses by respondents from the table indicated that to a very great extent, public relations strategies can enhance rural farmers' productivity and efficiency.

Discussion of Findings

The discussion of findings of this study was done on the basis of the research questions.

Research Question One: What are the public relations strategies used for mobilizing rural farmers for agricultural development? Findings from analysed data in Table 1 showed that all the public relations strategies listed in table 1, which are: demonstration on television, radio jingles/discussions, billboards, words of mouth by opinion leaders are vital public relation strategies for mobilizing rural farmers for agricultural development. Findings are in line with the opinion of Severin and Tankard (2005) who said that these channels of communication (public relations strategies) play different roles in diffusion process. For instance the mass media of radio, television, film and the internet reach large audiences rapidly, they speed up information and set agenda for society. While the interpersonal channel such as words of mouth by opinion leaders or change agents provide a two-way exchange of information. Severin and Tankard (2008) further added that the mass media channels are more important at the knowledge stage, whereas the interpersonal channels are relatively more effective at the persuasion stage. For a more successful impact, a blend of both the mass media and interpersonal channel of communication is highly recommended (Severin & Tankard, 2008).

Research Question Two: What is the most effective public relation strategy for mobilizing rural farmers for agricultural development? The analysis of data in Table 2 showed that words of mouth by opinion leaders is the most effective public relations strategy. Finding is in agreement with Wilson (2003) who advocated the use of opinion leaders as a public relations strategy to persuade the rural folks by way of sustained propaganda. Persuasion according to him means the ability to change the mind of people who have their minds made up about an idea, a product etc. Sometimes, it may be to reinforce or modify the opinion of an audience who already think the way you want them to, but not firmly committed to that way of thinking. The findings also supports the opinion of Severin and Tankard (2008) which states that a change agent or opinion leader is a professional person who attempts to influence adoption decision in a direction the he or she feels desirable. They went further to describe the qualities of opinion leader which place him at an advantage position to influence his audience to include: They usually have more education and status than those they are trying to influence, they have more access to media messages and enjoy a higher level of economic status than their audience. Words of mouth by opinion leaders provide a two-way exchange of communication between the sender and receiver. It provides the leverage for modification and reinforcement of ideas or opinion, thereby ensuring that effective persuasion is achieved. As such, the word of mouth strategy by opinion leaders is more effective than the mass media strategies in dealing with resistance or apathy on the part of the receiver.

Research Question Three: To what extent can public relations strategies help in mobilizing rural farmers' for agricultural development? Table 3, provided answers to this question. The findings on extent public relation strategies can help in mobilizing rural farmers for agricultural development indicated that respondents agreed to public relations strategies as very suitable for mobilizing rural farmers for agricultural development. Finding is in line with the diffusion of innovation theory by Everett Rogers (1983) which is concerned with how innovations, ideas, practices, etc. become known and are spread throughout a social system. It is also in consonance with

diffusion study by Ryan and Gross (1943) cited in (Serverin & Tankard, 1992). This diffusion of innovation study dealt with the diffusion of knowledge of hybrid seed corn among Iowa farmers. The innovation received by Iowa farmers in 1928, resulted in agricultural innovation and boost for more than 20 years.

Research Question Four: To what extent can public relations strategies enhance rural farmers' productivity and efficiency? Data for this question are provided in Table 4. Responses by respondents indicated that to a very great extent, public relations strategies can enhance rural farmers' productivity and efficiency. Knowledge and ideas acquired through diffusion of innovation from the mass media channels and words of mouth by opinion leaders provide adequate agricultural information that when applied could bring increase in productivity and efficiency. This findings further confirm the result of the study carried out by Ryan and Gross (1928) on Iowa farmer. Result of their study indicated that due to innovation received by Iowa farmer as a result of how the knowledge of the innovation was transmitted to the farmers, there was increase in productivity and efficiency.

Conclusion

No doubt, the mass media have played prominent role in different parts of Africa and other developing world. With the increasing rate of urbanization and the provision of infrastructure which promote the use and development of the mass media in major African cities, many people presently depend on these modern media of communication for their basic information needs. Different governments try to catch up with the media bug and be part of the global village or the information superhighway. However, this development remains a drop of water in the ocean. Available statistics reveal that about 70 percent of the global African nations that reside in the villages are yet to be part of the global village since they could not be reached through these modern mass media of communication. Even when they are reached, there still exist some other barriers which hinder their mobilization through the media. In view of this, different scholars have advocated an interface of both the interpersonal communication (opinion leaders) and mass media channels of communication for the mobilization of the rural dwellers. It is believed that when the potentials of these two are tapped and their benefits maximized, the citizenry will be better for it. This is hinged on the premise that Africans attempt at development along the line of western experience including the use of modern mass media of communication have not been able to hit the target. This, many argue is because the development experts or agents hardly observe or understand the people or realize the importance of local knowledge and attitudes towards the attainment of development objectives. One could safely argue that development efforts in most rural areas would have been more rewarding had steps been taken to integrate the mass media channels and interpersonal communication to ensure the efficacy of the message. This involves understanding the people, their worldview and packaging the messages in a way that they will appeal to them.

Recommendations

Flowing from the findings and conclusion of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Integration of mass media channels and words of mouth by opinion leaders should be employed in conveying persuasive messages meant for mobilizing rural farmers for agricultural development.
2. Words of mouth by opinion leaders should be given a top priority among other public relations strategies for rural farmers.
3. Public relations strategies for mobilizing rural farmers for agricultural development should be sustained by relevant agencies.

4. For sustainable development of the rural communities, especially in agricultural sector, public relation strategies as indicated by the study must play crucial role.

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