

FACTORING STRATEGIC PUBLIC RELATIONS PROCESSES IN BOOSTING THE TOURISM POTENTIALS OF CROSS RIVERS STATE

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Abstract

The lacklustre application of public relations strategies to boost tourism potentials in Cross River State is evident and could have been accountable for the downturn of tourism potentials in the state. The term strategic public relations plans intensify the need for strategies for development, where strategic planning is seen as a process that begins from the conception of the idea as well as sprawl through the entire campaigns, and not as a current event. The paper explored the strategic public relations plans for boosting tourism potentials in Cross River State by anchoring on the Two-Way -Symmetrical Model of Public Relations. The study adopted a projective qualitative policy-based design. Findings of the study indicate that Cross River State has great tourism infrastructure but suffers lack of maintenance on the part of the operators and government. Findings also reveal that there have not been strategies to sustainably drive and enforce tourism in Cross River State in the past eight (8) years. The study, therefore, recommended that government at all levels should plan and structure tourism strategies for a better processing of tourism in Cross River State tourism. Finally, the State must increase a marketing and promotional awareness campaign and knowledge about the tourist product among tourism generating markets.

Keywords: Factoring, Strategic, Public Relations, Plans, Boosting,

Tourism, Potentials

Introduction

Public relations and strategic communications are crucial promotional activities for tourism. Public relations represents unique way of branding and promoting, tourism products or services, by building a higher visibility in the public space. Public relations represents a strategic form of communication, which focuses on gaining the audience's understanding and acceptance towards tourists as well as on the process of building a good relationship between the tourists and the public. Effective public relations and communications will be essential in ensuring continued reassurance and confidence to secure the trust of tourists.

In the tourist sector, public relations is more than a necessity; it is a specific form of communication with special implications for tourism. It is a communication tool and one of its main purposes is to create a recognisable public image. This purpose is very important in tourism, in particular in the creation of a positive image for a certain tourist destination or for a whole country as a tourist destination.

One of the most effective means of promoting a country is represented by tourism. Tourism represents the most economically, socially and environmentally efficient approach, a real opportunity for showcasing and promoting local products and services. Many governments perceive tourism as an opportunity, especially for economic development, but, unfortunately, do not invest sufficiently in this, in ensuring quality services or maintenance of infrastructure and even less in elaborating a tourism strategy which, in such a situation, gains major relevance.

Tourism involves the tourists, the destination, its people, the routes and means by which they are brought together. This should be the primary focus of strategic use of public relations in tourism. Promoting a tourism destination should consider a series of factors for the public, such as natural factors, relief, geographical positioning, landscape, vegetation, climate, the general factors of human existence and activity, traditions, folklore, hospitality, culture; the human element, the behaviour and attitude of the local population, of the representatives of the various public or private institutions towards tourists; the general infrastructure, transportation and telecommunication, tourism

equipment, accommodation and food facilities, and entertainment. And in all of these, there are elements and duties for strategic public relations.

In order for a tourist destination to be efficient, both the internal public that includes services providers (pick up cabs from the airport, market sellers, hotel and restaurants operators) and external public (the tourist), should be addressed because the attitude constituted by the internal goes a long way to proof “tangible” satisfaction and contentment of the external public. Otherwise, what guarantee would there be, unless the signals sent from the inside matched expectations from the outside? Elaborating a tourism strategy should consider, first of all, an inventory of resources, evaluation of the potential market, the services provided, an important part in this respect being played by local or regional communities, as well as by the partnerships between public and private organizations, as decision factors.

According to Goodwin (2012), tourism is both an economic and a social phenomenon that is an agent of change in these areas as well as for the environment. Tourism involves the tourists, the destination and its people, and the routes and means by which they are brought together. This is the moment in which public relations should make their presence felt, offering efficient communication and promotion strategies related to tourist destinations. Organizations such as United Nations World Tourism (UNWTO) have highlighted the relevance of public relations on tourism destinations to be considered as smart powerful strategies. Thus, it is expected that tourists will visit the tourist areas with the highest development potential, both in terms of the site and the opportunities provided.

Cross River State no doubt has distinguished itself as tourist destination. Cross River State through deliberate repackaging and rebranding activities of its tourism development, has ensured it becomes major source of income generation for the State. Cross River State has good tourist potentials with positive impact for high infrastructural development. These include, The Carnival Calabar (the world biggest street party), The Obudu Mountain Resort which plays host to an international mountain race and acts as a retreat center for Presidents as well as an international conference center, The Tinapa Business Resort, Marina Resort, The Leboku New Yam Festival in Ugep, Mary Slessor's Residence in Creek town, Agbokim Waterfalls, Cercopan, Cross River National Park and other cultural festivals which has presented Cross

River State as a trade tourism distribution hub in African. According to Ajake and Amalu (2012), the Cross River Tourism Bureau reports show that in the last 15 years, the number of tourists who are foreign nationals increased from 2,210 between August and December 2007 to about 15,167 in 2012. This is in exclusion of the hundreds of thousands of tourists from within Nigeria who pay regular visits to the State, making Cross River State a major tourist destination point in the country, and, with plans by the government to boost the traffic to over 500,000 foreign nationals in 2021, and over a million in 2030.

Therefore, strategic Public relations in this direction is the catalysts that could bring favourable balance of actions in the tourism industry. Nwodu (2007) refers to strategic public relations as the different means, approaches and methods of planning the public relations activities of the organisation in order to achieve the desired objectives. Strategic Public relations is action-oriented to lead and guide destination management organisations towards attainment of the desired image and results. Fill (2009) reports that strategic public relations generate high levels of trust and confidence that single out public relations as an important technique used to reduce perceived risk. Thus, what the Tourism Bureau needs is to apply strategic public relations in destination management, personnel to assist the development, improvement and revival of tourism activities and attractions in Cross River State.

Statement of the Problem

Factoring strategic public relations plans in boosting the tourism potentials of Cross Rivers State requires some significant strategy ranging from deliberate attempt to infuse public relations into activities from the infrastructure to geographical and human resources potentials.

The process of the tourist having “tangible” proof of satisfaction and contentment starts from the airport, the condition of the vehicles, the cab driver who picks the tourist from the airport needs good public relations and communication, the roads to the tourism destination how accessible are they? Are they in decent shape? What is the condition of the hotels and how receptive are they? Do the restaurants have the type of food? The road side market sellers and how they present their wares to achieve the overall public relations goals of the tourist potentials of the state.

Tourism benefits extensively from the use of strategic

communication activities as studies have established correlations between it and the successful growth of tourism. Government wants significant growth of tourism in the next 5 to 10 years, Yet there is no significant and remarkable effort to apply public relations strategies in the promotion, management and administration of tourism by relevant tourism agencies in Cross River State hence, the need to be more strategic. Dilapidated social infrastructure like airports and airlines, road networks among others have affected movement of tourists while reputable traditional institutions have lost value. A notable problem of preservation and maintenance is fundamental because notable destinations known for their peculiar characteristics and beauty like landscapes, serenity are fast losing their values.

Tourism cannot exist in isolation from public relations planning, advertising and marketing. Cross River State tourism potential needs a well-designed public relations communication strategic to promote public awareness, aggressive advertising has public relations strategic is an organisational tool for growth. Therefore, since the use of mere public relations on a general scale has not yielded the desired results and targets set by the State Government, it becomes imperative to examine/identify/factor how the use of strategic public relations that focuses on the overall tourism activities will help the State Government meet her targets.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify specific ways that strategic public relations can be deployed for use in the various sectors of the tourism industry in Cross Rivers State to engender development.
2. To determine the place of strategic public relations and communication in tourism development in Cross River State.

Research Questions

1. What specific ways can strategic public relations be deployed for use in the various sectors of the tourism industry in Cross Rivers State to engender development?
2. What is the place of strategic public relations and communication in tourism development in Cross River State?

The Concept of Public Relations

There are many definitions of public relations which had created some form of misconception, but nonetheless, some basic parameters always help avail us with a frame with which we can conceptualize the process. First, every organisation that operates in a particular market or industry is generally never isolated from environmental elements that can affect its survival. Those elements of the environment that are very relevant to its operational processes, such as suppliers, consumers, and intermediaries, can be categorized as stakeholders or publics whose influence is no less important. Thus, there is the need for effective strategic public relations and communication as an approach to manage these elements in order to have development.

Somehow, the definition of Rex Harlow of Stanford University, 1977, one of the founders of modern public relations scholarship, provides a foundational learning base to appreciate the discourse of public relations. He defined public relations as a distinctive function of management that supports the development of communication, interaction, maintenance, acceptance and understanding of an organization and its publics. Harlow's notion was that, management of the organisation is able to understand and identify the key issues and problems by keeping intact with the public and respond through certain changes in the business. Public opinion is a great tool for the organisation to use in developing its strategies, products or services in order to build a good repute. Management has a responsibility towards the public and people give positive and negative response to the organisation according to their progress and performance. The term public relations has a very broad application which is informed by rather different sets of assumptions, values, and worldviews that have been subject of intense academic debate (Fitch and L'Etang, 2016; Russell and Lamme, 2016). Scholars in the field of public relations, identify some key variables which include distinctive management function; establishment of mutual lines of communication among various stakeholders; and understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its publics. Others are management of problems or issues; informing on and responsiveness to public opinion; emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; help management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change; serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends, and uses research and sound and ethical communication as its principal tools (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2010).

The approach above gives foundation to Kotler and Keller (2006, p.496) position of public relations as "a variety of programs designed to promote or protect a company's image or its individual products". The ultimate objective of public relations as proposed by Harlow (2000) is to obtain an impression or image positive about the offer of the following organisations in the eyes or minds of the public, consumers and other stakeholders. In this case, gaining a positive impression in the public mind is the goal of the management problems or issues. It also expands the frame of an earlier definition proposed by Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2000, p.6) that "public relations is a management functions that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the public on their success or failure depends". Kotler (2003) argues that public relations functions along five key matrixes. These are press releases, product publicity, corporate communication, lobbying and counselling. Press releases involve presenting news and information about the organization in the most positive light for media personnel to latch on; product publicity is in the area of sponsoring efforts to publicise specific products of organizations, while corporate communication is promoting organisations through internal and external communications to ensure that such organisation is seen in very positive lights. Lobbying deals with influencing legislators and government officials to promote or defeat legislation and regulations that seem contrary to publicly held beliefs, and counselling aligns with advising management about public issues and positions and image during good times and crisis.

The British Institute of Public Relations qualifies public relations as a "management of reputation" and for purpose of gaining understanding, supports and influence of public opinion and behaviour for the organisation (Petrovici, 2011). The Canadian Public Relations Society adopted the works of Fran Gregory and Jean Valin, and contends that the profession involves the use of strategic management of relationships between an organisation and its diverse publics, in a bid to achieve mutual understanding, realize organisational goals and serve the public interest. Other key aspects of this definition is that public relations "captures the core essence of what public relations professionals do" (Rickey, 2012, p.34). It is strategic communication and management between an organization and its publics (Grunig, 2013), and sometimes viewed as a descriptive collection of communication techniques and

activity that is part of societal dynamics (Gregory, 2012). It is the deliberate, planned performance to elicit positive public interest along the Franklin transfer process. Others view it as a two-way communication (Cameron, Wilcox, Reber and Shin, 2008) that reflect a dominant functional normative paradigm of excellence (Gower, 2006; Wilcox and Cameron 2012; L'Etang, 2013).

Strategic public relations is a management form of communication, which focuses on obtaining the public's understanding and acceptance regarding the process of establishing a good relations between an organisation and the public, especially in terms of shaping reputation and communicating information (Gaither, 2008). Through the communication and promotion strategies which they develop, public relations facilitate the building of confidence-based connections between the various organisations and the many categories of public, creating interactive relationships between the various levels of society. Strategic communication involves the deployment of requisite digital media that is in consonance with the needs of the people in mobilising them for development (Obukoadata, Uduma, Ene Okon and Ukam, 2020).

Sévigny and Flynn (2011) emphasized that the field of strategic public relations is in an unstoppable process of merger with several other fields of professional communication which include promotionalism (including advertising and advocacy), communication metrics and journalism. Public relations strategy is developed within the context of the organisation's vision, mission, corporate culture, policies and strategies (the internal), but focuses on an assessment of the external (Gregory, 2012). Effective strategic public relations and communications will be essential in ensuring continued reassurance and confidence to secure the trust of stakeholders. Public relations as a distinctive management function which helps to establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organisation and its publics by keeping management informed on public opinion and emphasises the responsibility of management on how to serve public interest. Public relations can increase tourism relationship with distinct and relevant stakeholders who are capable to build and sustain strong socio-economic bridges that will bring about positive changes in the standard of living of the people. It is worthy to note that, strategic public relations management cannot exist in isolation from tourism planning activities. It needs a well-designed public relations

packages as a catalyst for development. The role of public relations in tourism is to carry out research, feedback communication, evolution and plan on various subset of the tourism infrastructure.

The Concept of Tourism

Tourism could be related to the Biblical story of the visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon. The historical roots of tourism can be traced back almost to the origins of civilisation. Tourism has become a widely accessible product in the consumer-led leisure society where tourism is seen as a leisure or tourist activities, which is domestic or international in character. The term tourism refers to visits for pleasure, to see, learn and share the creativity of other culture. It is not restricted to physical visitation and site seeing. Even though tourism is designed for pleasure, tourist activity is not a time wasting and aimless adventure; it is a search for experience beyond the familiar. Tourism interests include all aspects of the gifts of life, landforms and water resources, including places of historic importance, which have been developed into local and international attractions.

United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) defined tourism as the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes not related to the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited. The use of this broad concept makes it possible to identify tourism between countries as well as tourism within a country. 'Tourism' refers to all activities of visitors, including both tourists (over-night visitors and same day visitor) www.world-tourism.org

Tourism has become one of the leading sectors in Nigeria, positioning the country as one of the world tourist countries. Tourism has a significant influence on income and encourages economic growth for a country (Wu and Zheng, 2014; Moses, Akpan and Obukoadata, 2013). Tourism functions as an agent for change and development as well as accelerates the development process of a country. Amin, (2019) Tourism is one of the determinants of national economic growth, social and cultural factor because it can influence the growth of other sectors in the economy. Norlina (2020) opines that sustainable tourism development can be completed by creating opportunities through networking and cooperation with service providers, where stakeholder engagement, the

development of locally oriented codes of conduct, and local government participation are crucial factors for sustainable tourism success. Aniah (2007) emphasized that tourism is also able to improve the welfare of people in tourist areas. Community welfare can be seen from the increase in the Human Development Index (HDI) of an area from year to year.

In a study carried out by (Lee and Jan, 2019) about an assessment of tourism benefits for local residents for development, they explained in their critical and analytical study some inputs which produce output and narrowed it to the pillars of communication which involves publicity and marketing tools. There are a number of components that must be included to complement the four-legged stool of tourism. Stakeholder's involvement, comprehensive research, a focus on tourism trends, familiarity with best practices, and political sensitivity are all critical elements of creating a successful tourism strategic plan. The World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), asserts that sustainable tourism should include economic, social, and cultural factors for all types of tourism and destinations. They also suggest that the development of sustainable tourism is the responsibility of all policy makers, stakeholders and businesses in the tourism sector. The development of tourism has impacted social and economic conditions of the locals. For instance, they get involve in tourism activities through selling of goods and services in hotels, restaurants, transportation services and the likes. Other activities include selling customized handicrafts, tickets for tourist sites and serving as tourist and information guides. It is instructive that for tourism to grow there has to be a provision of qualitative service, product or experiences by business, organisation or destination to meet the visitors' needs or demands. This provision is known as tourism supply or, as a form of production. It is this tourism supply that demands some strategic attention, which is the focus of this study.

The development of the tourism industry in a region is very dependent on the number of tourists who visit Lie (2004). The number of tourist visits is one form of indicator and a way to find out how successful the promotional strategies have been used in the tourism industry which has a positive effect on the tourist visit to a particular area (Putra, 2019). Tourism is both an economic and a social phenomenon that is an agent of change in these areas as well as for the environment.

Similarly, tourism requires that adequate infrastructure improvement such as roads, water supply, electricity power, and

telecommunication be provided. Yet, tourism needs the involvement of stakeholders, the host community, to promote tourism development. The market women need to be informed that good communication relationship with the tourists can provide new market for local products and improve retail, recreation and cultural facilities thereby improving economic potentials of the people (Putra, 2019) as well as form a critical part of the political narratives of the people (Obukoadata, Uduma, Akpan and Miso, 2016).

Tourism in Nigeria is considered as one of the most profitable investments in human resources, infrastructure, social structure, logistics are capital intensive. The tourist industry in Nigeria is steadily undergoing development when compared to those found in other countries of both the developed and developing world. Tourism has become a powerful vehicle of economic growth which has contributed to the socio-economic development of most countries of the world especially countries like Switzerland, Brazil, Thailand among others where tourism is the main stay of **their** economy, Amin et al, (2019).

Obukoadata (2017) and Egbaji (2011) note that tourism master plan envisages the upgrading of all the existing tourist destinations to meet international best standards. Upgrading of infrastructure which include; Airport, Road and Electricity, Hotels, Guest houses, Sea side Caravans and ensure maintenance of the facilities. Among the few studies so far done on this topic with particular reference to Nigeria is one by Goodwin (2012) where he traced the historical development of tourism and recreation in Nigeria from the pre-colonial through colonial to the post-colonial eras of the country. He further went deeply into the present state of the industry in the country. Goodwin concluded his study with an analysis of the attitude of Nigerians to tourism and recreation using Ilorin as a study. He concluded that an individual's level of awareness of the existence of a tourist resort can persuade the individual's desire to participate in tourism.

It is true that a tourist will be motivated to go to any particular resort only when he is attracted and the facilities of his choice are available in such a place. For instance, the hallmarks of Obudu Cattle Ranch include good weather/climate, scenery, amenities and accommodation, historical and cultural features, and accessibility

Natural resources such as (the hill, fertile, land, different animal species etc.)

In a study, Baggio (2020) posits that the capacity to develop a tourist destination is directly related to capacity of its actors to create and maintain collaborative networks, with a direct correlation between the relational dynamics found in a territory and the development of tourism.

According to United Nations World Tourism Organization, the arrival of international tourists was projected to reach 1.4 billion by the year 2020 and may generate an income of more than 1 trillion by 2030, the number of tourists is expected to reach 1.8 billion, signifying that in two decades' time, 5 million people will cross international borders for leisure, business, or other purposes, such as visiting friends and family, every day, besides the four times as many tourists traveling domestically. Meanwhile, the outbreak of the corona virus (COVID-19) has dealt a great blow to both the local and international tourist market, which as at 2020 has fallen short of the projected 1.4 billion by 20%. Baggio (2020) observed that most economies around the African region depend on Nigerian tourism sector as a major backbone, which corroborates the fact that Nigerian tourism represents 9% of global trade for tourism in Africa.

When putting the definitions and scope of public relations, as well as its meaning, into the language of tourism, it may be said that “the concept of public relations in tourism should refer to all activities used by the providers of a tourism offer to create a favourable opinion in the public about their overall activity, their work, their services and the goals of their work.

Theoretical Framework

The Two-Way Symmetrical Model of Public Relations in tourism which tends to induce change in belief, attitude and behaviour is used for this study because public relations seeks to persuade tourist to accept a destination, have positive attitude about such destination, perceive such destination as having the capabilities to meet their relational needs and ultimately visit the tourist site.

The two-way symmetrical model of PR was propounded by Grunig and Hunt (1984) and was later broadened by Stacks and Watson (2007). Public relations is viewed as a two-way communication between the organisation (product or service) and public have their goals

(attracting attention, building social prestige and credibility, enlargement of placements, lowering promotion costs), achieved with the help of public relations instruments (events, news drawing attention promoted by media, public individual performances) through several stages (research, defining the goal, defining the target, defining the media in accordance with target, defining interest area, creating events, creating message, communication, action and result marks).

This form of public relations could involve media relations, identity and image building of touristic destination, lobbying, maintaining public relations crisis situation, relations in touristic organizations, relations with stakeholders and potential investors, financiers, and donors and paid advertising.

Methodology

The study adopted a projective qualitative policy-based design that examined and deconstructed several literatures and empirical base in these areas to support the shift towards the strategic use of public relations in a holistic perspective. As a projective study, it first identified key tourist attractions and indexes in the State, their state of acceptability, then identified select tourists auxiliary industries like the transportation sector, hotels, vendors, tour guides and intergovernmental agencies, and then factored ways in which strategic public relations can be used to enhance their relevance. It examined the place of theories of strategic management and amplified the relevance of the two way symmetric models to support claims and projections. The presentation is done in several interrelated themes such an evaluation of the tourism potentials of the State, adaptability of strategic public relations and ultimate factoring of same.

Discussions

Research question one:

What specific ways can strategic public relations be deployed for use in the various sectors of the tourism industry in Cross Rivers State to engender development?

The Cross River State Tourism Bureau uses marketing communication in prompting tourism potentials in Cross River State. It is important to note that public relations differ from other forms of marketing tools mainly advertising. Tourism needs strategic public

relations and effective communication for it to grow. It is public relations that best create the launch of a brand, as it has a greater credibility.

The Cross River State tourism operators need to understand that Public relations are an important part of the marketing and advertising mix. This is because, public relations is becoming one of the most important parts of marketing and sales functions of tourism as its definition includes “promoting improved understanding between operators and their publics”. Strategic public relations include the number of steps to create and protect a company's image and its particular product image. It is used to communicate all the necessary information to grow a good reputation in the mind of the public.

The specific ways strategic public relations can be deployed for use in the various sectors of the tourism industry in Cross Rivers State to engender development are:

- Press Releases: for examples Hotel public relations practitioners attract travel writers through well written news releases and creative e-mail designed to persuade reporters to visit.
- Fact sheets or press kit: when journalists are in the Hotel, the public relations manager should be certain that the journalist's rooms are furnished with complete fact sheet (press kit) containing information on every detail about tourism destination in the State.
- Web Sites: due to the explosive growth in the technology in the last decades, people are buying their vacations on the net. As there are many opportunities, a tourism company must advertise the destination attractive with the photographs and also positive feedbacks on the web site.

The major concern of strategic public relations in tourism is packaging, promoting and good will to the public. What public relations do is to fine tune the advert message and send it to the marketing unit for the public. This sector is predicted to grow more rapidly than any other. The operators may utilize public relations in order to evaluate the market demand, create additional sales opportunities in the competitive market, and to reinforce quality of a product against adverse publicity (Gregory, 2012).

This could be applicable through the following approaches and evaluations of the specific tourist destinations:

Calabar Carnival festival in Nigeria, also known as 'Africa's Biggest Street Party' or Pride of Nigeria started in 2004, it is an annual carnival in Cross River State, South-Eastern part of Nigeria. The carnival is held every December and was also declared by the then Governor Mr. Donald Duke as an activity to mark Christmas celebration and making Cross River State a home for tourism and hospitality in Nigeria and Africa. The carnival has attracted investors to the State who come with their different art works to show case. Over 200 tourists both local and international have visited Cross River State for the carnival. One of the challenges currently faced is lack of sustenance by the current administration. The Calabar carnival has been put on hold since 2019 by the Governor Sen. Ben Ayade. A website should be created to help disseminate information about the workings of the carnivals to the global community since participation had gone beyond the local sphere.

Tinapa is a business and leisure resort located North of Calabar Free Trade Zone. It was developed in four phases under a Private Public Partnership promoted by the Government of Cross River State in 2007. The Obudu Mountain Resort (formerly known as Obudu Cattle Ranch) is a ranch and a resort is found in the Southeast of Nigeria. It was developed in 1951 by M. McCaughey, a Scot who first explored the mountain range in 1949. The mountain is sited in Obanliku LGA of Cross River State. The mountain extends towards Nigeria South Eastern border. The Obudu Mountain is spread over an area of over 40 square miles 100 km² and rises to about 5,200 ft. (1,584 metres) above sea level. These could also benefit from the use of strategic press releases, well developed websites, and media kits to enhance two-way communication processes (Obukoadata, 2017).

The Marina Resort which is on the water mouth of the Calabar, a settlement known as Duke Town which is an ethnic settlement of Calabar Metropolis, Cross River State in Nigeria. Duke Town is also popularly referred to as Old Calabar, and by political division, under Calabar South here, sits Marina Resort, it is indeed a great historical site since there are indications that the Portuguese navigator Diego Sam, around 1493 visited the Old Calabar River estuary and that by 1505 there was a regular Portuguese trade there, exporting slaves for the sugar plantations of Sao Tome and the West Indies. Marina Resort stands where

30 percent of the slaves that left Africa were deported and the community depends on the environment supply-farming, fishing and trading to survive.

On the other side is the **Leboku Festival** which is a dialectic name for the annual New Yam Festival of the Yakurr people because the word is the language of the Yakurr people. The Leboku is usually celebrated every August. It is an attraction for international tourists.

The National Museum is a 19th century building set on a hill overlooking the Calabar river. The building was built in 1959. It was used to serve as the residence and administrative office of British officials during the colonial era. It houses artifacts, documents and several materials from colonial times. Just by the lawn next to the museum is a ship bell dated as far back as 1848.

The Agbokim waterfalls are situated in Etung local government area of Cross River State in South-eastern Nigeria. Very close to its border with Cameroon. The waterfalls are about 15 km² from Ikom. The waterfall is made up of seven streams, which chutes over steep cliff, providing a seven faced falls. There is also the **Kwa falls** located in Anegeje village in Akamkpa LGA of Cross River State and an extension of the Kwa River. Its sparkling waters cascades down basement rocks situated at the Oban side of Cross River National Park. There are 234 steps made to the Kwa Falls, and the waterfall flows into a canopy of the tropical rainforest and mangrove forest that is rich in Mahogany, Ebony, and Spruce tree in a fascinating landscape. Not left out is the **Pandrillus Nigeria Drill Ranch** located in Boki at the foot of the Afi Mountain about a 5 hour drive from Calabar. It is a conservation area where Drill Monkeys are rehabilitated and re-introduced into the wild. It is also a home to 28 orphan chimpanzees and other rescued animals like antelopes, parrots and more.

Not left out are the **Afi Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary** is situated in southern Nigeria, and covers 104 km². It was founded in 2000 with the idea of providing refuge to the most endangered animal species, such as the Cross River gorilla, the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee, the drill and the gray-necked rock fowl. The Cross River National Park is a national park of Nigeria, located in Cross River State, Nigeria. There are two separate sections Okwangwo (established 1991) and Oban (established 1988) the park has a total area of about 4,000 km², most of which consists of primary moist tropical rainforests in the North and Central parts, with

mangrove swamps on the coastal zone. There are also the Alok Ikom monoliths are a series of volcanic-stone monoliths from the area of Ikom, Cross River State, Nigeria. In the 1960s, Allison estimated that the monoliths may have been engraved between the sixteenth and twentieth century (Ajake & Amalu, 2015). All of these tourist destinations require a pull from the use of strategic public relations deploying tools such as physical and online media kits and fact checks, as well as use of digital media (Obukoadata, Uduma, EneOkon&Ukam, 2020)

Research questions two:

What is the place of strategic public relations and communication in tourism development in Cross River State?

According to Asemah (2011) and Obukoadata (2017), strategic public relations and effective communication is essential in ensuring continued reassurance and confidence to secure the trust of stakeholders. Both industry and consumer media outlets are craving for reliable information. Tourism depends heavily on communication, either to communicate the destination attraction, or tourist to communicate between the publics.

All tourism communication channels are important for potential tourist and the public. A single communication measure can affect several target group of communication at once. The first communication link between the tourist at the airport, the taxi driver, the hotel receptionist and the market people goes a long way to add to the value of experience of the tourist to come back or not. One goal of the communication is to establish a unique image for the tourism destination. The central significance of strategic communication in tourism is intensified by the intangibility of the touristic product (Solimar International, 2014) to meet the overwhelming relaxation needs of the tourist. An exception to this would naturally create apathy.

The Cross River State Tourism Bureau will need to shift from destination marketing and must redefine its communication using public relations strategies and tactics that promote tourism-friendly destination, safety and responsible travel. As destination infrastructure is important in tourism so also is effective communication. Reputation makes or breaks businesses in the hospitality and tourism industry, and with customer's service as the crux of the industry, the employees, the community, the market women are on the front lines of contact with the tourist. This makes effective communication critical to tourism industry.

Implications of the findings

Based on the objectives of this research outlined earlier, the researchers drew allusion to the following implications.

- Tourism makes up about great impact on global human economy and has more environmental impact, if the right strategies are applied. But these impacts are much less studied, managed, and regulated. There are a number of possible reasons for this, lack of maintenance on the part government. It was also realised that tourism in Cross River State has significantly contributed to infrastructural development. This is evident in the availability of world class facilities, resorts and hotels such as Tinapa Business resort, Marina resort Obudu ranch resort, the Calabar Metropolitan and other world class facilities which have sprung up through tourism.
- The researchers found out that contrary to government announcements about funding of the sector, very little of the said amount is actually remitted to the sector. Also from the analysis made of the Tourism Bureau, the researchers found out that the tourism industry suffered from misappropriation and mismanagement of funds.
- Government tourism budgets are spent mainly on international marketing to sale the tourism destination, they **do not** sit back to put in place adequate strategies such as public relations tools which looks at the both external and internal audience, and plays a management function that helps promote and attract more tourist visitors, and sustain them for a future visit.
- Findings also reveal that there has not been strategies to sustainable drive and enforce tourism in Cross River State in the past eight (8) years.
- It was also observed that, the (Facebook fan page) created by Cross River Tourism Bureau is not maintained. No update on the page to

create adequate awareness, promote and motivate tourist to patronize these tourist sites due to irregular updates and delay in responding to messages sent/questions asked about the destinations through the social networking sites such as the Cross River Tourism Facebook fan page. This confirms the result of the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report (2015) that the tourism marketing skills of Nigeria is below average, thus, resulting in under-development and slow level of patronage of tourism products. This is largely due to the fact that most of the tourism sites have been abandoned, and under-developed. This position aligns with Obukoadata, Uduma and Obukoadata (2021) that migration pattern which is a core part of tourism must adapt consumer inclusiveness if it cover success.

- For Cross River State to be able to operate and to compete in the emerging global tourism marketplace, they will need to identify the most efficient ways or strategies of promoting tourist products, building a positive image through the aggressive mix of strategic public relations, advertising and marketing to increase the visibility of tourist destinations. There should be a conscious efforts at diffusing these innovative ideas to the core locals and not the unperturbed elites (Akpan, Rishante& Obukoadata, 2015) and the dictates of the two-way symmetric model that allow for effective and enhanced two ways communication processes.

Conclusion

Cross River tourism focus has always been away from marketing communication, and concentrating on mere information dissemination, thus, leaving out one of the most vital strategic public relations tool. What the Cross River tourism industry needs now is maintenance of its tourism destination, and a mix of strategic public relations, marketing and advertising to effectively communicate for it to become more attractive to tourists since other areas are developing unique tourist destinations.

Cross River State tourism does not lack tourism infrastructure, they are there but only needs maintenance to bring them back to work. Tourism in Cross River State has a potential to grow just like any destination in other parts of the world. However, the growth pace of tourism has been painstakingly slow due to the approaches and strategies used overtime which is based on egocentrism and mere press agency.

The solution to enhancing and growing the tourism potentials in Cross River State in line with meeting the 2030 benchmark set by the State Government is adequate deployment of strategic public relations which incorporates largely the nuances of effective communication. This is crucial in repositioning of destinations' image, goodwill and reputation. Public relations strategies are viable techniques and lubricants that are very essential to the revitalization of the tourism industry in Cross River State. This will attract new tourists and retain loyal ones.

In conclusion therefore, tourism destination managers must understand that for tourism to grow in Cross River State, they must integrate public relations strategies, marketing communication and advertising mix the (three wise principles of promotion sales) as the veins and arteries that carry blood from the "heart" of tourism and supply blood fluids of communication to the entire system in a give and take mechanism based on mutual understanding to harmonize destinations and tourists' interest and close credibility gap.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been drawn from the findings made earlier in this paper.

- i. Destination Sites Renovation for Visitor's Attraction:** A good tourism destination must be accessible either by road, water, air. A lot of tourist's sites in Cross River State are totally in a bad state for lack of maintenance. The roads to those tourists' sites are in bad condition and shape and should be improved.
- ii. Effective Strategic Public Relations and Communication** will be essential in ensuring continued reassurance and confidence to secure the trust of stakeholders. Using strategies and tactics that promote safety and responsible travel. Destination marketing will need to shift

from promoting travel to promoting safety and supporting local communities.

- iii. **Stakeholders mapping** is crucial to tourism recovery in strategic public relations and communication plan. This is to identify all audience groups in the value chain. The stakeholders mapping should include tourism and hospitality bodies, the media, employees, customers, suppliers, community partners, and public. All of these stakeholders should adapt public relations, proactive media relations specifically tailored to local market needs, direct marketing and planning for the future.
- iv. **The Government should create an active website and a tourism page and accounts** on major social networking sites such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram page and so on, and ensure that the page is regularly updated and potential consumers' questions and complaints are quickly and aptly responded to so as to generate and maintain interest.
- v. **Tourism organisations should train staff** on a regular basis, offer tourism incentives such as free lunch or discounts on lodging/hotel accommodations rates at the destinations.
- vi. **Finally, increasing a marketing and promotional awareness campaign** and knowledge about the tourist product among tourism generating markets.
- vii. **Involvement of the Local Population:** The local people should be greatly involved in tourism in the state

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