



Public relations practice in private sector companies in Gabon

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the practice of public relations in private sector companies in Gabon. Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the public relations practitioners employed in 15 companies chosen from the register of the companies at the Trade Ministry of Gabon. The interviews explored themes such as position of communication departments and communication practitioners in an organisation use of research, communication practitioners' relationship with top management, gender and education of practitioners, effect of globalisation on communication practice in Gabon as well as the description of typical activities of communication practitioners. The study revealed the public relations is a developing profession in Gabon and that public relations practice in the surveyed companies displays attributes common to PR in other countries as well as some distinctive qualities shaped by the context of Gabonese history, society and culture.

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1. Introduction

Public relations (PR) in Gabon is a developing field which is becoming increasingly influential and is gaining recognition as a distinctive profession. Political, economic, cultural and social systems differ from one country to another – this affects how PR is perceived, practised and taught. At the same time, globalisation has influenced many societies, cultures and economies and the field of PR in Gabon has not been immune to this process. Global spread of management approaches, philosophies and practices by business schools and multinational companies in almost every field and industry contributes to the propagation of ideas and practices in the communication and PR sphere. At the same time some unique qualities of the profession are present in different countries. The aim of the study reported in this article was to explore the characteristics of PR practice in Gabon.

2. Brief background to public relations in Gabon

Gabon is a Central African country of 258 000 km² with approximately 1.5 million inhabitants of whom nearly half a million live in the capital Libreville. Despite its small size, Gabon is home to more than 40 diverse ethnic groups. French is the official language of the country. The Gabonese economy rests primarily on three export products: oil, manganese and wood. Oil provides 76 per cent of all export earnings. Since the country's independence from France in 1960, Gabon has had only three presidents. Of these three, Omar Bongo Ondimba had the longest term of office, staying in power for 33 years. Gabon, a single-party state from 1968 to 1991, was an authoritarian state in which freedom of speech and political rights were limited (Boudon, 2004). Public protests in 1990, caused by declining oil prices and political discontent, led to a new constitution in 1991. Gabon officially adopted a multi-party system that year and as a result the country experienced liberalisation and

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significant growth of the media sector, with new players coming to the fore. Public relations is a comparatively new concept in Gabon. Multinational companies were the first to introduce PR in the country in the 1960s, just after the independence of Gabon. This coincided with numerous oil companies arriving in Gabon to take part in the exploration and exploitation of the Gabonese rich oil reserves. While Publicom was the first communication agency to operate in Gabon (Matsahanga, 2006), there are currently over 30 communication agencies, including the subsidiaries of multinationals, operating in the country. However, only six are frequently used by the organisations that were included in the study: Edicom, Akajoo, Iris Com International, Ocean Ogilvy Gabon, Label de l'Ogooue, and Synergie Saatchi & Saatchi. All six agencies provide services in the field of marketing, advertising and communication.

3. Method of research

The main objective of the study was to explore the practice of PR in private sector companies in Gabon from the perspective of the Excellence Theory of public relations in line with the research trends in international PR, which focus on finding the generic elements of PR as well as on pinpointing the cultural, social and political influences in different countries.

A list of 234 companies was obtained from the national address file of the [Gabonese Trade Ministry \(2006\)](#). Although 30 organisations were initially selected from the population, semi-structured interviews with 15 participants from different companies were ultimately conducted. A heterogeneous sample of companies was drawn using diverse selection criteria ranging from type of ownership, geographical location, size of the business, industry (such as banking, petroleum, mining, retail and tourism) and the national or multi-national character of the enterprise.

The following organisations participated in the study:

Oil companies: Shell Gabon, Total Gabon

Insurance companies: Ogar, Asinco

Banks: Citibank, Bank International du Commerce et de l'Industrie pour le Gabon (BICIG)

Mobile network providers: Moov, Celtel, Airlines: South African Airways (SAA), Sky Gabon

A mining company: Compagnie Minière de l'Ogooué (COMILOG)

An electricity and water provider: Société d'Energie et d'Eau du Gabon (SEEG)

A mining service provider: AstridCo

A manufacturer: Société des Brasseries du Gabon (SOBRAGA)

A construction company: Société de Construction de Bâtiments (SOCOBA)

One hour long interviews were conducted with the heads or representatives of communication departments each of these organisations. The interview themes were developed in English and translated into French. To ensure correctness of the translation, the questions were translated back into English by a third party. The themes were based on the normative, generic principles of excellent PR programmes ([Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002](#), pp. 13–15, [Lee & Evatt, 2005](#), p. 32).

The following themes were identified:

Involvement of public relations in strategic management

Empowerment of public relations in the dominant coalition or a direct reporting relationship to senior management

Integrated public relations function

Public relations as a management function, separate from other functions

Public relations unit headed by a manager rather than a technician

Two-way symmetrical model of public relations

A symmetrical system of internal communication

Knowledge potential for managerial role and symmetrical public relations

Organisational context for excellence

A qualitative data analysis was undertaken, following the process outlined by [Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill \(2003\)](#). The process began with the analysis on site when collecting data, and was followed by the transcription and initial analysis of interviews. A comparison of emerging themes and the categorisation of core codes was subsequently undertaken. A further step involved recognising relationships and developing categories to facilitate the process. The next step entailed explanation building. Finally, the findings were compared with the established concepts and findings in the literature.

4. Results and findings

In Gabon the term used for public relations is “communication function” and this term was used consistently during the interviews. In all researched organisations the PR departments are small units. Respondents from BICIG, Shell Gabon, Sky Gabon, Total Gabon, SEEG, SOBRAGA, SOCOBA, COMILOG, Moov, and Celtel indicated that there were no more than 10 people working in the respective PR departments. According to respondents from Ogar, SAA, Asinco, AstridCo and Citi Bank these companies had only one person responsible for PR activities. The responses obtained from the representatives from the participating companies, the majority of which are multinationals, indicate that these firms have a communication

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