

# Assessment of the role of public relations in the management of reputation of indigenous companies in southeast Nigeria: A study of Innoson motors

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## ABSTRACT

In today's competitive and digitally-driven marketplace, corporate reputation remains a cornerstone for organizational success, particularly among indigenous companies operating in complex environments. This study investigates the public relations strategies of Innoson Motors, a leading indigenous automobile manufacturer in Nigeria, with a focus on how these strategies enhance reputation, stakeholder engagement, and organizational performance. Utilizing a qualitative, phenomenological research design, ten purposively selected stakeholders including customers, employees, and suppliers were interviewed to explore their perceptions of the company's public relations (PR) efforts. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings reveal that Innoson Motors leverages a broad mix of traditional and digital PR tools, including media relations, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, and internal communication systems, to build brand credibility. The use of digital platforms such as social media has significantly improved brand visibility and stakeholder interaction. Nonetheless, challenges such as managing online backlash, sustaining content engagement, and measuring PR effectiveness were identified. Despite these, opportunities abound in influencer marketing, employee advocacy, and strategic analytics. The study concludes that PR is not merely a supplementary function but a strategic management tool crucial for sustaining corporate reputation. Recommendations include enhancing digital PR infrastructure, embedding crisis communication plans, and establishing key performance indicators for PR evaluation.

## ARTICLE INFO

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of reputation in organizations cannot be overstated as Gibson et al. (2006) postulate that a positive reputation facilitates and expedites the business of successful organizations, while negative ones destroy individuals and organizations. Griffin (2014) emphasizes that reputation cannot be owned but rather earned, distinguishing between reputation and brand by indicating that unlike brand, reputation cannot be projected actively; it is earned stating that reputation is about "acceptability and legitimacy to a much wider audience" (Griffin, 2014, p. 2), an intangible asset ensures one has a competitive advantage as they are rare, valuable, and difficult or costly to imitate, substitute, and transfer (Radic, 2013). The reputation of a company is a valuable asset that can make or break its success and in today's competitive business environment, companies must work tirelessly to build and maintain a positive reputation, this is particularly true for indigenous companies in Nigeria, which face unique challenges in establishing themselves as credible and trustworthy businesses. According to Fombrun and Shanley (1990), reputation is a critical intangible asset that can influence a company's competitiveness, profitability, and long-term survival. In Nigeria, indigenous companies such as Innoson Motors have made significant strides in establishing themselves as reputable businesses, however, despite their success, these companies still face challenges in managing their reputation, particularly in the face of increasing competition and scrutiny from stakeholders. Dowling (2001) notes, reputation management is a complex and multifaceted process that requires companies to engage with their stakeholders, respond to criticism and feedback, and demonstrate their commitment to social responsibility and ethical business practices.

The Nigerian business environment is characterized by high levels of uncertainty, corruption, and regulatory complexity, which can pose significant challenges for indigenous companies seeking to establish themselves as reputable businesses (Egwemi, 2015), furthermore, the cultural and social dynamics of the Nigerian market require companies to adopt a nuanced approach to reputation management, one that takes into account the unique needs and expectations of local stakeholders (Adekoya, 2014), in this context, reputation management is not just about maintaining a positive image, but also about building trust and credibility with stakeholders, as Grunig and Hunt (1984) note, public relations plays a critical

role in reputation management, as it enables companies to communicate effectively with their stakeholders and build relationships based on trust, transparency, and mutual understanding. Despite the importance of reputation management for indigenous companies in Nigeria, there is a dearth of research on this topic as most studies on reputation management have focused on multinational corporations, with little attention paid to the unique challenges and opportunities faced by indigenous companies in Nigeria, this study aims to address this gap by exploring the challenges and opportunities of reputation management for indigenous companies in South East Nigeria, with a particular focus on the role of public relations in managing reputation and by examining the experiences and perspectives of companies such as Innoson Motors, this study seeks to provide insights into the complex dynamics of reputation management in the Nigerian context.

### 1.1 Research objectives

The study sought amongst others to;

- Examine the public relations strategies employed by Innoson Motors in building its brand reputation and establishing trust with its stakeholders.
- Investigate the role of digital media in Innoson Motors' public relations efforts and its impact on the company's brand reputation and stakeholder engagement.
- Identify the challenges and opportunities faced by Innoson Motors in its public relations efforts and providing recommendations for improvement of the company's public relations strategies.

### 1.2 Research Questions

- What are the public relations strategies employed by Innoson Motors in building its brand reputation and establishing trust with its stakeholders?
- What is the role of digital media in Innoson Motors' public relations efforts and its impact on the company's brand reputation and stakeholder engagement?
- What are the challenges and opportunities faced by Innoson Motors in its public relations efforts and how can it be improved?

### 1.3 Statement of Problem

Many studies have emphasized the importance of public relations in building trust and credibility with stakeholders, while these study provides valuable insights into the role of public relations in building relationships, lack of specific focus on the public relations strategies employed by indigenous companies in South East Nigeria is a challenge, past studies have provided comprehensive overview of the role of public relations in building organizational image and reputation, however, these study does not specifically focus on indigenous companies in South East Nigeria, and therefore, does not provide insights into the unique public relations challenges and opportunities faced by these companies. While existing studies have highlighted the importance of public relations in building a strong reputation and promoting organizations, there is a significant need for research on the specific public relations strategies employed by indigenous companies in South East Nigeria, particularly in the context of new media, this research would help to address the knowledge gaps in understanding the role of public relations in promoting indigenous companies in the region and provide valuable insights for practitioners and scholars alike.

### 1.4 Significance of the study

The study on the public relations strategies employed by Innoson Motors in Enugu, Nigeria explored ways in which the organization uses public relations to achieve its goals and objectives providing insights into the public relations strategies employed by Innoson Motors, including research, planning, communication, and evaluation. The study also provided insights into the ways in which Innoson Motors uses public relations to build and maintain relationships with its stakeholders, including customers, employees, suppliers, and the wider community and by exploring the public relations strategies employed by Innoson Motors, the study provided empirical evidence on the role of public relations in achieving organizational excellence in the context of a Nigerian organization, providing recommendations for Innoson Motors and other organizations in Nigeria on how to develop and implement effective public relations strategies that can help to achieve organizational excellence, therefore contributing to the body of knowledge on public relations and organizational excellence, and providing insights that can be used by practitioners and scholars in Nigeria and beyond.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The term public relations or PR is a broad one and it has been conceptualised by different scholars in diverse ways and one of the most simplified definitions of the term was put forward by Hayes (2021) that any attempt to portray oneself to others in a particular way is considered PR. Public relations is a strategic managerial activity that aims to establish and sustain mutually advantageous connections between an organisation and the general public (Egbulefu & Nwaoboli, 2023), the outcome of these efforts significantly impacts the overall performance and outcomes of the organisation. Cutlip, Centre, and Broom (2006), Olariu (2017), states that public relations play a vital role in the promotion and communication strategies, asserting that despite its significant potential in enhancing public awareness, cultivating market preferences, and protecting market products, its use remains rather seldom and the potential benefits of incorporating public relations as a strategic tool for enhancing corporate promotion have often been underestimated, resulting in missed opportunities for campaign success. The bulk of professions in existence today can be attributed to their roots in America and Europe, and public relations is no exception to this trend. In Nigeria, the field of public relations is seen as a significant economic function, it is noteworthy to acknowledge that the origins of public relations practise in both the United States and the United Kingdom can be traced back to the 19th century. The early initiation of Public Relations in these nations may contribute to the high level of professionalism observed in the field (Egbulefu & Nwaoboli, 2023). According to Ogbemi (2011), the development of Public Relations in Nigeria is intricately linked to the country's colonial history. The British Institute of Public Relations, cited in Yarosan and Asemah (2007) defines public relations practice as the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics. Public relations describes any form of communication which is aimed at bringing about goodwill and mutual understanding between an organization and its publics (Nwaoboli, 2022).

Watson and Kitchen (2010), "reputation was, is and will always be of immense importance to organizations, whether commercial, governmental or not-for-profits" (p. 378), believing that good reputation opens the path to acceptance and approval by stakeholders, while Men (2013) highlights the importance of reputation as an organizational asset, noting that scholarship across major disciplines such as marketing, management, economics, sociology, and communication have attempted to identify possible drivers of favorable reputation. Seitel (2017) identifies two elements of reputation which were rational products and performance, as well as more emotional

behavior factors such as customer service, CEO performance, personal experience with the company, etc. (p. 125), in other words, reputation is based on what is done, not what is said. In reviewing what various authors have said, it is clear that an organization is its reputation. The value of public relations in organizations has been demonstrated by scholars and professionals alike. Rensburg and Cant (2003) suggest that public relations exist in every organization and institution, whether the organization recognizes it or not, every action of an organization, from phone calls to welcoming a visitor, newsletters, and other activities, leaves an imprint in the mind of stakeholders, an organization whose portrayed identity does not sync with the image perceived by its publics is likely to suffer reputational damage.

As a planned communication, it concerns every organization, whether commercial or noncommercial, government inclusive, this is because; every organization needs to create a favourable image for itself before its internal and external publics for successful operation (Dayo, 2006). Corporate image is closely related to brand equity. In general, corporate image is considered an asset which gives the organization a chance to differentiate itself aiming to maximize their market share, profits, attracting new customers, retaining existing ones, neutralizing the competitors' actions and above all their success and survival in the market (Bravo et al., 2009; Sarstedt et al., 2012). Through effective public relations, an organization will be able to win public acceptance (Asemah-Ibrahim, Nwaoboli & Asemah, 2022), effective coordination of activities will be needed to achieve these goals and objectives. Public relations, which is a management function becomes handy in facilitating effective communication of organizational goals and objectives, public relations department in any human organization handles various activities, which include: conflict resolution or crisis management, internal or employee relations, community relations, promotions, media relations, environmental scanning and sponsorship programmes (Asemah, 2009).

Asemah (2011) public relations is considered a two-way communication between an organisation and the audience critical to its success, further describing PR as an activity geared towards the construction of positive image or reputation for an organisation and also influences attitudes of the people towards a brand, it suffices to state that PR is responsible for the creation of favourable attitudes among key audiences. Media relations play a prominent role in the field of public relations, since they involve the development of tactical strategies aimed at influencing the attitudes and behaviours of individuals. Additionally, media relations are utilised to establish new sales channels and possibilities. (Alhadid and Qaddomi, 2016), the utilisation of public relations channels for the purpose of generating targeted traffic to enhance sales is a practise that is seldom seen. According to Brady (2005), the concept of a firm's image refers to the perception held by the general public towards the company, which is shaped by several factors such as branding, public relations initiatives, media coverage, engagement with stakeholders, workers and trade unions, as well as interactions.

Throughout the world, public relations have become a central pillar in the effort to communicate effectively with stakeholders as public relations is about developing and building an effective relationship between an organization and its publics through the use of communication (Wilcox et al., 2015; Broom & Sha, 2012; Butterick, 2011) as public relations researchers believe that PR is a deliberate attempt to build the image and reputation of a business in a social context (Sharma et al., 2013). The value of public relations can therefore not be overlooked, as it is an essential factor in deciding the success of any organization by developing and fostering its corporate reputation (Sharma et al., 2013). Organizations are sometimes seen as the nexus of relationships, and having a good relationship with multiple stakeholders may be the core value of an organization, however, the ability to truly manage multi-stakeholder relationships cannot be wholly successful without the involvement of the public relations manager. Grunig and Hon (1999) articulate that, apart from the CEO, the public relations manager may be the only management function that examines issues from a multi-stakeholder viewpoint. Van Ruler and Verčič (2002) emphasize the importance of the public relations manager's role in reputation management, noting that they bring a special concern for broader societal issues and approaches to any problem with a concern for the implications of organizational behavior towards and in the public sphere.

The ability to build and manage reputation is, therefore, a critical component of the public relations profession, as public relations provides an institutional structure for coordinating all communication with the aim of establishing and maintaining a favorable reputation between an organization and its publics (Cornelissen, 2004). Wilcox et al. (2015) report on the results of a survey of marketing executives by PRWeek, which suggest that public relations is ranked higher in effectiveness than advertising and marketing in nine areas, including management of corporate reputation. Public relations, in essence, contributes highly to the development, good functioning, and sustainability of any organization. PR professionals have the ability to

identify, establish, and extend an organization's sphere of influence, thereby helping to establish the organization's corporate identity and corporate reputation (Lukusa, 2009).

Innoson Motors, a leading automobile manufacturer, provides a fitting example, as a homegrown brand, having leveraged on different public relations strategies to establish a strong reputation and build trust with its stakeholders, Cutlip, Centre, and Broom (2006), Olariu (2017), states that public relations play a vital role in the promotion and communication strategies of indigenous companies like Innoson Motors, the company's commitment to quality and customer satisfaction has been consistently communicated through various public relations channels, including social media, media relations, and community engagement, this has helped to create a positive image and reputation for the brand, which has contributed to its success in the Nigerian market. The research gap identified in the text relates to the lack of studies on the specific public relations strategies employed by indigenous companies in South East Nigeria, particularly in the context of digital media, this gap is significant, as the existing literature on public relations in Nigeria has primarily focused on multinational corporations and government agencies, with little attention paid to indigenous companies. Studies such as those by Cutlip, Centre, and Broom (2006), Olariu (2017), and Asemah-Ibrahim, Nwaoboli & Asemah (2022) have highlighted the importance of public relations in building a strong reputation and promoting organizations, however, these studies have not specifically focused on indigenous companies in South East Nigeria, and therefore, do not provide insights into the unique public relations challenges and opportunities faced by these companies. Egbulefu & Nwaoboli (2023) has emphasized the strategic managerial activity of public relations in establishing and sustaining mutually advantageous connections between an organization and the general public, while this study provides valuable insights into the role of public relations in building relationships, it does not delve into the specific public relations strategies employed by indigenous companies in South East Nigeria.

Similarly, Asemah (2009) has underscored the importance of public relations as a management function in facilitating effective communication of organizational goals and objectives, however, this study does not explore the role of digital media in public relations efforts by indigenous companies in South East Nigeria, which is a significant oversight given the increasing importance of digital media in public relations. Furthermore, Olariu (2017) has highlighted the importance of public relations in promoting organizational image and reputation, however, this study focuses primarily on the role of public relations in promoting multinational corporations, and does not provide insights into the unique public relations challenges and opportunities faced by indigenous companies in South East Nigeria.

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

The Excellence Theory of Public Relations, developed by James Grunig, Larissa Grunig, and David Dozier, is a comprehensive framework that explains the role of public relations in achieving organizational excellence, stating that public relations is a critical component of organizational excellence, as it enables organizations to build and maintain relationships with their stakeholders, posits that excellent public relations programs are characterized by a symmetrical communication approach, which involves a two-way communication process between the organization and its stakeholders, this approach involves listening to the needs and concerns of stakeholders and responding accordingly, also positing that excellent public relations programs involve a range of strategies, including research, planning, communication, and evaluation, research involves gathering information about the organization's stakeholders and the environment in which it operates, planning involves developing a public relations strategy that is aligned with the organization's goals and objectives, developing and implementing effective public relations strategies is critical, as it enables the organization to build and maintain relationships with its stakeholders and by conducting research, planning, communication, and evaluation, Innoson Motors can develop a public relations strategy that is aligned with its goals and objectives.

### 2.2 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design, which is appropriate for exploring lived experiences and perceptions (Creswell, 2007). The goal was to understand the public relations strategies employed by Innoson Motors and how stakeholders perceive and react to these strategies. A phenomenological approach was chosen to explore the essence of participants' experiences with Innoson Motors' public relations efforts. The target population comprised stakeholders directly engaged with Innoson Motors, including customers, key employees, and suppliers, using purposive sampling, 10 participants were selected based on their knowledge of and interaction with Innoson Motors' public relations strategies. This non-

probability method ensured that only information-rich cases were included (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, this allowed for flexibility in probing relevant issues while maintaining consistency across respondents (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interview guide included questions aligned with the study objectives and was validated by communication scholars prior to administration. Interviews were conducted in-person and via digital platforms to accommodate participants' availability. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. All participants signed informed consent forms in accordance with ethical guidelines. Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), the analysis involved familiarization with data, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, and defining them. NVivo software assisted in managing and organizing codes. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, member checking, peer debriefing, and triangulation were employed. Participants reviewed their transcripts for accuracy, while a peer review helped validate emerging themes. Thick descriptions also supported transferability, and a clear audit trail enhanced dependability. Ethical approval was obtained from a university ethics board. Participants were assured of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and anonymity. Data were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes

## 3. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Examine the public relations strategies employed by Innoson Motors in building its brand reputation and establishing trust with its stakeholders.

Interview Question: Theme; Public relations tools employed by Innoson Motors

Can you describe the public relations strategies that Innoson Motors has employed to build its brand reputation and establish trust with its stakeholders?

According to the majority of the respondents, Innoson Motors over the years from its infant years till date as one of the leading giants in indigenous manufacturing in Nigeria have employed different public relations tools ranging from social corporate responsibilities initiatives, awards and recognition programs for both internal and external stakeholders, media relations, crisis communication plans, press release, employee communication, community engagement influencer partnerships etc as these tools have been considered amongst others tool public relations tools that have been employed from the early years of public relations practices and as such are been adopted and utilized by Innoson Motors.

Investigate the role of digital media in Innoson Motors' public relations efforts and its impact on the company's brand reputation and stakeholder engagement.

Interview Question: Theme; Digital Media Strategies and its impacts

How does Innoson Motors use digital media (e.g. social media, website) in its public relations efforts, and what are the goals of these efforts?

Interviewees was of the view that digital media usage and applications have greatly and positively affected and impacted on Innoson Motors' public relations efforts both amongst internal and external audience greatly impacting the company's brand reputation and stakeholder engagement keeping them on business growth radar as well as increasing visibility and recognition beyond the primary host communities breaking the barriers of space and time in brand portrayal and visibility bringing Innoson Motors closely to its target audience both new and existing.

Identify the challenges and opportunities faced by Innoson Motors in its public relations efforts and providing recommendations for improvement of the company's public relations strategies.

Interview Question: theme; Challenges, opportunities and recommendations for improvement

What are some of the challenges that Innoson Motors has faced in its public relations efforts, and how has the company addressed these challenges?

Innoson Motors have faced a lot of challenges and hiccups in its public relations efforts over the years amongst internal and external stakeholders who forms the very fabric and yarn of this company who are the core recipients of these public relations efforts. The respondents revealed that Innoson Motors have faced a lot of challenges and hiccups in its public relations efforts ranging from crises communication management as crises can arise without prior notifications, social media management a double edged sword with both opportunities for engagement offers and reputation management risk, keeping target of a growing diversified audience as well as measuring the effect and efficiency of different public relations campaigns and efforts etc, they were also of the view that Innoson Motors have faced a

lot of challenges and hiccups in its public relations efforts, there was still hope, as respondents recommended that Innoson Motors can actually improve its public relations strategies application by getting more involved in brand influencer partnerships with the local communities, creating high quality content marketing strategies, employee advocacy to build credibility and brand awareness as well as measurement and evaluation of data driven decisions and so on,

#### 4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings underscore that Innoson Motors has implemented a combination of traditional and strategic public relations practices that are crucial to its brand image and stakeholder relations, respondents emphasized community engagement initiatives, sponsorships, employee relations, media press releases, and awards as essential tools utilized by the organization, these align with Cutlip et al. (2006) and Asemah (2009), who argued that PR serves as a cornerstone for stakeholder integration and organizational communication. Innoson's conscious engagement with stakeholders supports Grunig et al.'s (2003) Excellence Theory, especially in fostering two-way symmetrical communication that balances organizational objectives with stakeholder expectations. These PR efforts have strengthened the company's legitimacy and have positioned it as a reputable indigenous brand in a competitive market. In particular, media coverage of CSR activities has helped project a socially responsible image, enhancing both trust and loyalty, this supports the view of Dowling (2001), who notes that stakeholder perceptions are increasingly shaped by ethical corporate behavior and sustained engagement. Digital media was consistently highlighted as a transformative component in Innoson's PR strategy. Respondents agreed that platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and the company's website have enabled direct and real-time communication with stakeholders, enhancing brand visibility, accessibility, and responsiveness. This aligns with Asemah-Ibrahim, Nwaoboli, and Asemah (2022), who emphasized digital PR's role in transparency and trust-building. The digital landscape has allowed Innoson to transcend geographic barriers, engaging audiences across Nigeria and the diaspora, which reinforces the view of Wilcox et al. (2015) that digital media creates a multiplier effect for corporate messaging. However, the dual-edged nature of digital media providing both opportunity and risk was also evident. Negative comments, misinformation, or unaddressed crises on social media can quickly spiral, necessitating prompt and strategic digital reputation management, this supports Coombs and Holladay's (2012) perspective on the need for agile and proactive online crisis communication strategies.

Innoson Motors' PR efforts are not without obstacles, as stakeholders pointed to significant challenges, including inconsistent content strategy, limited capacity to measure communication effectiveness, and the difficulties of managing public perception during crises. These findings echo Doorley and Garcia (2015), who emphasized that successful reputation management hinges on well-defined metrics and proactive stakeholder engagement. Despite these challenges, opportunities exist for Innoson to deepen its PR footprint. Respondents recommended increased investment in influencer collaborations, robust employee advocacy programs, and strategic partnerships with community-based organizations. Such strategies could enhance message authenticity and expand reach, which aligns with the work of Dalton and Croft (2003) and Schreiber (2011), who advocate for integrated communication frameworks that reinforce organizational values and identity. Furthermore, embedding data analytics into PR planning could facilitate more targeted and effective campaigns. This reflects Highhouse et al.'s (2009) advocacy for evidence-based approaches to reputation evaluation, thereby transforming PR from a reactive function into a proactive driver of business value.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

Innoson Motors has effectively used public relations to build and maintain its corporate reputation, the alignment of its PR strategies with stakeholder expectations has fostered trust, legitimacy, and visibility, however, to sustain this reputation, strategic adaptation to evolving digital landscapes and stakeholder needs is essential.

##### 5.1 Recommendations

- Development of proactive plans and media training for handling crises.
- Enhancement of digital engagement by investing in content marketing, SEO, and platform-specific strategies.
- Adoption of tools like KPIs and analytics to assess effectiveness as well as measure PR impact

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