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## The Quest for Information Dissemination: Critiquing the Use of the In-House Newsletter to Communicate the Institutions' Mandate among Academic Staff Members at Great Zimbabwe University

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**Abstract:** This paper seeks to explore the importance of the in-house newsletter at Great Zimbabwe University (GZU) in articulating and managing its vision, mission statement and niche area to its academic staff. The article evaluates the extent to which the GZU newsletter incorporates corporate communication (CC) strategies in promoting its founding vision and/ or niche in the arts, culture and heritage to the academic staff at the university. In order to achieve this objective the paper employs a case study design as the framework for data collection and analysis. The paper also employs documentary analysis as data collection tools. The outcomes of this research proved that GZU to a lesser extent employs the GZU newsletter as part of its CC strategies in promoting its vision, mission and niche area to its internal publics, specifically the academic staff. The effectiveness of the newsletter is compromised by poor distribution to academic staff members and inadequate funding to produce a fully-fledged magazine.

**Keywords:** Great Zimbabwe University; Newsletter; Academic staff; Niche area; Corporate communication; Internal publics.

### 1. Introduction

This paper seeks to explore the importance of the in-house newsletter at Great Zimbabwe University (GZU) in articulating and managing its vision, mission statement and niche area to its academic staff. The article evaluates the extent to which the GZU newsletter incorporates corporate communication (CC) strategies in promoting its founding vision and/ or niche in the arts, culture and heritage to the academic staff at the university.

Each of the state universities in Zimbabwe was mandated to promote a certain niche area in its teaching, research and community involvement. Whereas the Midlands State University and the University of Zimbabwe have broad mandates, the rest of the universities GZU included were given niche areas to promote as state universities. GZU was specifically tasked to promote the niche in the arts, culture and heritage. Whereas the institution has a number of schools such as law, social science, natural sciences and education, the teaching and research in these schools should reflect the university's unique mandate, that of promotion of the arts, culture and heritage. It is therefore important for the in-house newsletter to highlight this mandate to all academic staff from the staff in the Centre for Culture and Heritage Studies to staff in the Herbert Chitepo Law School. It is against this background that the paper seeks to appraise the role played by the in-house newsletter in articulating the institution's vision, mission statement and the niche area to the academic staff so that they carry aspects of the niche area in their teaching, research and community involvement. In corporate communication (CC), the newsletter becomes key in the promotion of the university niche area.

Communication strategies and media management have become key activities for organizations across the political, social and cultural spectrum seeking positive public perceptions and support. The image of GZU is supposed to be consciously built, marketed and promoted firstly to its internal staff especially academic staff before it gains wider acceptance by other stakeholders.

The birth of Great Zimbabwe University was considered to be a landmark development in higher education in Zimbabwe considering its unique mandate anchored on arts, culture and heritage. This entails promoting the exploitation of Zimbabweans and other Africans' own creative genius in a global and competitive world. According to the GZU's Five Year Strategic Plan- 2008-2013, "the Great Zimbabwe University strives to become a national and regional centre of excellence in the areas symbolized by the Great Zimbabwe Monuments, specifically heritage reclamation and the creative arts and culture..." (p6). In light of this thrust, it is imperative to examine the level of awareness of all academic staff on the vision, mission statement and the deliberate promotion of the arts, culture and heritage.

## 2. Corporate Communication

There is little systematic empirical research on Zimbabwe's State Universities' communication strategies to internal publics (academic staff) in promoting corporate goals and objectives. This is despite the fact that the academic staff (who are part of the internal publics) contribute significantly to the competitiveness of state universities and the achievement of their corporate objectives. Vengesai (2007) looked at how the Midlands State University (MSU) tackled its communication challenges focusing on its broad publics. The research examined the communication challenges that MSU was facing in light of an adverse economic environment at the same time. It did not focus on the university's communication strategies with its internal publics especially the academic staff.

Nordin and Halib (2011) research sought to get an insight on the extent of communication satisfaction in a highway concessionaire company operating in the Klang Valley in Malaysia. A survey was conducted to gauge employees' satisfaction on the communication climate, supervisory communication, subordinate communication, horizontal communication, organizational perspective, organizational integration and media quality. The study found that communication is crucial in organizations for connecting the workers and allowing the organizations to function effectively. Communication is encouraged as an integral part of organizational processes as the flow of communication up and down the organizational hierarchy has effects on efficiency, decision-making and morale of organizations. Above all, the research concluded that internal communication enhances organizational effectiveness.

According to Yang and Grunig (2005) public relations practitioners and scholars have strived from many years to explain the value of communication programs. However, until recently, they have focused most of their efforts on the evaluation of individual communication programs, such as media relations, community relations, or employee relations. In fact, the root of evaluation is value Yang and Grunig (2005). He also argues that focusing only on the evaluation of individual programs is too narrow and that evaluation should be an on-going part of all communication programs. Yang and Grunig (ibid) also pointed out that effective organizations choose and achieve appropriate goals because they develop relationships with their publics. Ineffective organizations cannot achieve their goals at least in part, if their publics do not support and typically oppose management efforts to achieve what publics consider illegitimate goals. According to this view, a public relations department makes an organization more effective when it identifies the most strategic publics as part of strategic management processes and conducts communication programs to develop effective long-term relationships with those publics.

The excellence study (Dozier and Broom, 1995) answered the question of what constitutes public relations excellence and argued that the concept of public relations orientation builds an understanding of public relations by answering an organization's philosophical stance towards Public Relations Orientation (PRO) and how it relates to the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of organizational public relations in achieving organizational goals. It also offers managerial benefits as public relations orientation can be operationalised as a measure that highlights deficiencies. The adoption of corporate communication strategies in public institutions is a relatively new development in state run institutions.

## 3. Theoretical Framework.

### 3.1. Two-way Symmetrical Model

This model suggests that communication is a two-way process but in a balanced manner. Research takes the form of formative research to learn how the public perceive the organization and determine the consequences of the organization's actions for the publics. A generally consistent image among the several stakeholders is vital. This means that although it is prudent to stress different facets of the organisation's identity to its various publics, the organisation should avoid projecting an inconsistent image at all times.

## 4. Research Methodology

In this paper, I mainly rely on content analysis, interviews and to some extent participant observation as it is also part of the academic staff at GZU. The paper randomly selected newsletters from January 2010 to December 2011.

### 4.1. Historical analysis of GZU newsletter

The analysis of the newsletter was based on its visual appeal and content. The communicative capacity of both the newsletter was evaluated on the basis of their ability to promote the corporate vision and mission of GZU to the academic staff. The aim was to find out the extent to which the newsletter communicates the corporate goals and identity of GZU or motivates the internal publics to speak positively about GZU's niche area to its academic staff members.

The GZU newsletter traces its ancestry to a newsletter which was established in 2006 by MASU. The newsletter was called MASU ON Monday. According to the then Director of Information and Public relations:

*"The newsletter which is produced by the department of Information and Public Relations is to be published every Monday morning and will carry articles on such news as appointments, promotions, MASU diaries, official announcements and all other relevant social news. It will also have a classifieds section that will have columns like For Sale, Lost and Found..."* (MASU on Monday (Volume 1, Issue 1: page 1, April, 2006).

This declaration by the Director of information served as the editorial policy of the MASU newsletter which was subsequently changed, firstly to a weekly then, fortnightly and finally a monthly publication. According to the then Director of Information and Public Relations, the launch of the newsletter was supposed to lead to greater

interaction within the MASU community. In order to make the newsletter relevant and a success, the Editor –In – Chief of MASU appealed to the internal publics to contribute news articles and other relevant materials for publication. This could also have created a sense of ownership in terms of the content of the newsletter with reference to the internal publics.

The newsletter had an editorial staff of five (5) employees. It should be noted that when GZU completed its metamorphosis from MASU, it inherited almost everything including the newsletter but only changed its name to Great Zimbabwe Newsletter in line with the change of the corporate name to Great Zimbabwe University. The GZU newsletter evolved from MASU on Monday, to GZU on Monday then to a monthly GZU Newsletter. There are no clear reasons why the newsletter changed from a weekly publication to a monthly publication. A comparative analysis of these newsletters reveals that the scope of MASU on Monday was wider and detailed than the GZU Newsletter as evidenced by its content. It should also be noted that the MASU On Monday was silent on the corporate vision and mission of MASU just like the GZU newsletter.

Basically the idea is that the newsletter especially its first page should carry a corporate face of the institution. This means that it should say something about the corporate vision, mission, corporate strategy, identity and image among other things on a continuous basis. Such things should be clear or be well pronounced to the internal publics to harmonize their efforts towards fulfilling the corporate goals and objectives. The underlying motive should be to gain a wider understanding and acceptance of the organizational goals, policies, programmes and products.

So the silence of GZU on the mission and vision of the institution is a clear underutilization of the newsletter in motivating and directing the efforts of the internal publics towards meeting the expectations of the external publics'. The success or failure of GZU will be measured against its vision and mission in society. As pointed earlier, it is from the vision or mission statement that the world comes to have a general understanding of GZU's corporate image. The public image or opinion is supposed to be built concisely through corporate communication strategies or public relations activities. [Gray and Balmer \(1998\)](#) state that a strong image could be built through a coordinated image building campaign-encompassing name, logo, signage, corporate advertising and public relations. So the PR department should utilize the newsletter by giving it a corporate face of GZU.

In the current business environment, internal and external publics not only expect to have unrestricted access to corporate information but also demand that organizations are held accountable for their strategic choices. Whereas, the manager of corporate communication seeks to conceptualize the organization as a totality of interconnected messages, the corporate culture endeavour is focused on myths, rituals and stories articulated and managed in order to integrate the organization's members around one shared reality that is captured by the vision and mission.

The newsletter should enable at least the academic staff members to be conversant with the vision, mission and niche area of GZU in order for them to impart knowledge and undertaking research that fulfils the vision, mission and the promotion of the niche area of the university. What it means is that the academic staff should effectively do research that is in line with the vision and mission of the university since it is the duty of GZU to disseminate new knowledge in line with its vision.

Employees should be the first target audience given the fact that they are the ones who are supposed to work on the ground to enable the organization to realize its corporate objectives. The Vision and Mission statement give a summary of what to expect at GZU. Given this reality, it is therefore imperative for the department of Information and Public relations to make concerted efforts through the newsletter to market and manage the corporate image and identity of GZU in line with its acclaimed vision of cultural heritage reclamation thereby maximizing on the virtues or value of intangible assets such as goodwill and good corporate reputation to its internal publics.

Employees should be motivated and geared towards advancing the vision or mission of the organization since they are the ones tasked with the implementation research policies across the schools in the university. GZU is obliged to promote and sustain its vision through the delivery of degree programs that are inclined towards culture and tradition as envisaged by its logo, which symbolizes the Great Zimbabwe Monuments. It is widely held that the mission of higher education is to educate, train, undertake research and in particular contribute to the sustainable development and improvement of society as a whole. In doing so, the first target of such information should be the academic staff.

## **5. Discussion and Findings**

The distribution and circulation of the GZU newsletter is limited to management staff and chairpersons of departments thereby undermining the goals of corporation communication or public relations. The study discovered that the rest of the employees needed to make their own initiatives in order to access the newsletter.

The circulation of the newsletter is such that only one photocopied copy (black and white) is delivered to each department. On average a department has about 13 staff members. So in most cases, the newsletter ends up in the hands of the Chairperson and secretary of the department. The study discovered that internal publics rely on their peers and other informal channels for getting information. Such a vacuum in most cases results in the creation of wrong perceptions that might undermine or downplay the vision, mission and niche area of the institution.

A survey carried out by this researcher revealed that most academic staff other than those in the Simon Muzenda School of Arts and Heritage is aware of the niche area especially the role that should be played by the newsletter in the promotion of the niche area. Such employees, especially new academic staff members are not even aware of the niche area of the university and the role and function of the PR department. This clearly shows that the PR

department is undermining its role in handling internal communication thereby failing to promote the wide ownership of its corporate goals and objectives.

With reference to the newsletter, this research discovered that it puts more emphasis on administrative and social issues other than the vision, mission and niche area of the institution. For example in the month of June, 2010 the newsletter had eight stories on both administration and social issues respectively and completely carried no story which had a bearing on the vision, mission and niche area of GZU. The same applies for the months of October and December 2010. What it actually means is that there was no deliberate planning or sustained effort to promote the vision and mission of the institution to the internal publics using the newsletter which could have been shown through the amount of vision and mission inclined stories. So the PR department needs to utilize the GZU Newsletter to promote the wide ownership of the corporate goals.

The analysis of the newsletter was based on its visual appeal and content as well as its communicative capacity or ability to promote the corporate vision and mission of GZU to the academic staff. The aim was to unearth the extent to which the newsletter communicates the corporate goals and identity of GZU or motivates the academic staff to speak positively about GZU to the other publics. The research discovered that even though the newsletter was received favourably by the academic staff, it carried few stories on the vision, mission and niche area of GZU. The newsletter did not carry a single story which had a bearing on the vision, mission and niche area of the GZU in the Months of March and September 2010.

Therefore, the newsletter did not make a significant impact in promoting the vision and mission of GZU to the academic staff. The fact that the newsletter is silent on the vision speaks a lot about the inability of the PR department in perceiving the need to promote the vision and mission of the institution through this internal publication.

The distribution of the newsletter excludes more readers since it is only circulated amongst the management staff. The majority of the internal publics are left out since they have no access to the newsletter. So the academic staff is not targeted by the newsletter and that undermines their position to be informed and speak positively about GZU.

It should be noted at this moment that when GZU completed its metamorphosis from MASU, it inherited almost everything including the newsletter but merely changed the name to Great Zimbabwe University Newsletter in line with the change of the corporate name to Great Zimbabwe University. However, it should be pointed out that the logo, vision and mission statements of MASU and GZU are essentially the same. What was actually changed is the corporate name but the other features were retained and expanded. The corporate logo of MASU and GZU are just the same as in terms of their appearance and content.

So indeed, GZU has a monthly Newsletter which caters for the internal publics but the newsletter is totally silent on critical issues such as the corporate vision, mission and niche area of the institution. Apart from that the University logo which appears on top of the front page is too small for one to see what it depicts or represent. The study discovered that such an appearance distorts the identity of the institution to its internal publics. This distortion is a disservice to a young and new brand institution of higher education which is yearning for publicity.

To a greater extent this has undermined the role of the PR department in positively projecting the corporate identity of GZU. The newsletter should project, promote and protect the identity of GZU on the market especially to the academic staff among others. The front page should carry a corporate face of the institution. This means that it should say something about the corporate vision, mission, corporate strategy, identity and image among other news on a regular basis. Such news should be clear or should be well pronounced to the internal publics to harmonize their efforts towards fulfilling the corporate goals and objectives. Most of the respondents from academic staff proved that they came to know about the vision, mission statement and niche area of the institution through their own initiatives rather than the newsletter. The underlying motive is that internal publics like academic staff are supposed to gain a wider understanding and acceptance of the organizational goals, policies, programmes and products so as to gain their commitment.

The academic staff should be clear and conversant with the vision and mission of GZU in order for them to impart knowledge and undertake research that fulfils the vision and mission of the university. That will ensure that the academic staff will effectively carry out research that is in line with the vision, mission and niche area of the university.

Given this reality, it is therefore imperative for the department of Information and Public relations to make concerted efforts through the newsletter to market and manage the corporate image and identity of GZU in line with its acclaimed vision of cultural heritage reclamation thereby maximizing on the virtues or value of intangible assets such as goodwill and good corporate reputation to the academic staff (internal publics).

Respondents from the academic publics outside the now school of Simon Muzenda School of Arts, Culture and Heritage Studies, are not aware of the vision and mission of GZU and did not show any level of message retention from the newsletter or unable to recall the vision and mission of the institution. However, for those who showed some level of awareness of the vision, mission and mandate of GZU, they got to know about it through informal channels of communication such as their peers. The researcher asked the respondents to show their level of understanding pertaining to the vision of the institution and one respondent said: "It is a learning institution that should educate the people of its mandate. However, besides educating the community, GZU is also supposed to help the community through providing several services such as offering of employment."

This actually shows that the respondent is not aware of the vision of the institution. When respondents were asked about the source of their information about GZU most of them pointed out that they heavily relied on informal channels of communication. One respondent openly said: “By observing the courses the institution offers, talking to peers, the teaching process, listening to speeches at ceremonies and by interacting with peers”.

One respondent also said that his source of information about GZU is “casual observation as well as participation as an academic staff member” and commenting on the relationship between PR and their department the respondent also said “the relationship is not direct but I think that the PR department is supposed to market our programmes to the outside world”. This actually shows that the PR department is not engaging the internal publics on the promotion of the institution’s aim, mission statement and mandate.

This is despite the fact that the relationship between the PR department and the other arms of the university should be direct and clear. Public relations as a two-way conduit should provide key linkages between the organization and its subordinate strategic development and should hold the organization together. These harmonious relationships can go a long way in accomplishing corporate goals.

One internal respondent also said: “The PR department hardly informs the new recruits in order that they fully participate in furthering the vision of GZU. The PR should have direct relationship with staff members and interact more actively with them through workshops/seminars, email and other virtual networks”.

This shows that the PR department is failing to educate internal publics. It is the mandate of the PR department to inform the public about the corporate objectives as well as launching employee communication programmes through various in-house communication methods as to create sense of belongingness among the employees towards the corporation goals and increase their efficiency for better output.

Asked on the corporate goals of GZU one respondent said “I am not fully aware of GZU’s corporate goals”. This actually shows that the department is not promoting the vision of GZU to the academic staff members.

## 6. Conclusion

The research showed that the CC function at GZU is facing a number of challenges that undermine its effectiveness in terms of promoting its vision, mission and mandate among its academic staff members. These challenges emanate from the fact that the department operates under the confines of a shoestring budget that is only able to purchase few promotional clothing. Such financial constraints to a larger extent obscure the capability of the PR department in helping in the promotion of the university’s vision and mission. In this case, the GZU Public relations department is faced with numerous challenges to such an extent that they produce most of their publications in black and white rather than using colour. Their aspirations to communicate effectively to both internal and external publics is strongly undermined by the fact that most of their publications especially the newsletter does not reach the majority of the staff members. Logically, GZU should tailor its communication strategies to its academic staff as a critical stakeholder in the institution.

The distribution of the newsletter and other publicity materials to few designated offices leaves many internal publics to figure out on their own about GZU .The content of the newsletter is inconsistent especially on the vision and mission of GZU to such an extent that at times there are no stories related to the vision and mission of the institution in the newsletter. The PR department has failed to build commitment from the academic staff, develop a culture in which ideas and learning are daily realities at every level due to the fact that their communication strategies do not encourage a two way symmetrical communication process.

The PR department should increase the volume and quality of its communication content to internal publics as an attempt of managing and promotion of its mandate. The PR department should put measures in place to improve on what is currently available on the internet (GZU website) to establish a mutually beneficial relationship between GZU and its publics. The PR department should attempt to work hand and glove with the respective departments or faculties so that no- one is left out in this process.

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