

MARKETING THE CAUSE: COMMUNICATIONS TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES AND STRATEGIES – THE CASE OF THE EAST AFRICAN COMMUNITY

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Early communications in the EA integration

Throughout its long history, regional integration in East Africa has recognized the role of information and communications. Under the East African High Commission (1948-61), the precursor of the East African Community, the East African Literature Bureau was established in 1948 to promote literacy in the region and reach the population with a message of development. The regional authorities employed both mobile libraries and mobile cinemas that reached the urban concentrations as well as the vast expanse of the rural areas.

The first East African Community which lasted from 1967 to 1977 built on this, establishing an elaborate focal point and network of public communications that ensured effective coverage of the activities of the Community both at the Headquarters and in the field involving the vast array of common services, joint projects and programmes that were spread throughout the region. The communications activity included rural and agricultural development extension services.

Despite this recognition, the communications effort has, over the years, faced a number of challenges related to resources, structures and strategies. Among these challenges have been inadequate allocation of resources, low levels of literacy in the region; and lack of effective communications strategy. It is recognized that among the causes of the collapse of the first EAC in 1977 was the eventual breakdown of communications between the regional organization and its broad constituency.

Communications in the revived Community

The revival of the Community in 1993 provided a challenge and opportunity to streamline and strengthen media and communications function in the regional integration and development. Indeed, the East African media supported the public opinion and pressure for the resumption of regional co-operation. It was expected that the media would be rallied to keep up strong advocacy and galvanize robust popular participation in the regional integration process and, in particular, ensure that regional integration was sustained this time round.

The revival of regional co-operation involved a distinct policy objective, emphasizing a new participatory approach. The first East African Co-operation Development Strategy (1997-2000) made a bold declaration that “the co-operation envisaged in this Strategy is people-centred, and provides for the participation of all stakeholders and sections of the East African society in the co-operation activities.” Based on this policy platform,

successive policy pronouncements were made on the important and positive role of communications in the regional integration and development process.

This culminated in the Second EAC Development Strategy (2001- 2005) which was more specific and elaborate on the need for a definitive information and communications strategy. The 2nd Development Strategy declared that information was a "resource and a tool for development". It provided that the Partner States would undertake comprehensive collaborative programme of promoting communications, including application of advanced ICT systems and empowering the media to support the integration process.

What followed, however, was a new mismatch between the stated or declared objectives of the information and communications programme and the resources and structures, if any, that were provided to realize the programme. At the end of the 2nd Development Strategy (2001 –2005) only less than 10% of the strategic interventions that were envisaged in the information and communications function were realized.

During most of this period there was marked pre-occupation with national issues and setting of separate strategic visions in the respective EAC Partner States at the expense of the regional agenda. The all powerful Sectoral Councils on the various identified areas and sectors of regional co-operation were formed but none was institutionalized on information and communications. Most significant was the failure to prioritize the development of an information and communications strategy during this period. Consequently, a common East African identity or shared vision did not emerge.

Communications under the EAC fast track process

During their Special Summit held in Nairobi on 27-29 August 2004, the EAC Heads of State expressed concern at the slow pace and what it termed the “tardiness” embedded in the regional integration process. The Heads of State resolved to examine ways and means of deepening and expediting the integration process.

At this historic meeting, the Summit set up a Committee to look into this matter whose findings (the Wako Report) of November 2004 identified the twin aspects of the EAC problematique. According to the Wako Report, there was a low level of awareness among the East African people coupled with a low level of the people’s appreciation and involvement in the integration process.

Finally, the Committee recommended, among other issues of strategic interest, that “there is need for proper recognition and focus on the role of communications and marketing (of East Africa) to the East African people and other stakeholders, including the international community”.

In confirming the existence of this predicament, a study conducted by the Steadman Associates of Nairobi in July 2007 revealed that whereas average 89% were aware of the existence of the Community, 72% were favourably disposed towards the regional

organization. In essence, more people were aware of the existence of the East African Community than were sold to its idea.

The Steadman findings were, more or less, validated by the subsequent public surveys, in particular the findings of the National Consultative Process on Fast Tracking the East African Federation that was conducted in October 2006-May 2007. More important, however, were the revelations of the surveys that those proclaiming to endorse regional integration did so only in the broad, idealistic sense. When you opened the can of this endorsement, you found that it contained a stack of fears, suspicions and doubts about the motives and prospects of regional integration.

The definitive message coming from the public surveys reflected the twin predicament in which the EAC found itself in, i.e.:-

(a) The regional projects and programmes were not well on course. There was widespread negative perception and cynicism among the people about the EAC projects and programmes. The “achievements” that the organization was claiming to have made were viewed as not concrete enough. They were abstract and involved a lot of studies and longwinded paperwork, etc; and

(b) A critical mass of the East Africans, particularly among the 80% that inhabit the largely impoverished rural areas, were not aware of the existence of the Community, were left out and had not been reached with the message of the Community. A good

proportion of the population that were aware of its existence, did not profess a deep or clear awareness and understanding of the operations, dynamics and implications of the regional organization.

On the whole, it became obvious that the EAC was rooted in a perception and performance problematique that needed to be urgently addressed and redressed.

Communications in the resurgent EAC

In reaction to these indictments, the EAC engaged in a livid effort to reclaim its space. Vigorous, if also frantic activity was engaged in the integration process and, finally, a fast track orientation emerged. This marked a turning point, and there was a sharpening of the EAC focus on the need to achieve and demonstrate greater **efficiency** and **effectiveness** of its projects and programmes as well as promote greater **visibility** and informed **popular participation**.

The EAC was challenged to mount broad collaborative effort with various stakeholders to focus the EAC interventions on results orientation and impact on the socio-economic transformation of the East African region. The Community would have to be brought closer to the people and no longer let to relax in the mode of a remote, esoteric bureaucracy with only peripheral relevance to the concerns of the ordinary people of East Africa.

With the new demand, there was renewed intensification of the regional integration effort, at both the programmatic and information and communications levels. A new terminology found its way into the EAC lexicon with the espousal of a new paradigm, to “concretize” the regional integration process. Thus, the EAC Customs Union was achieved in January 2005. In rapid order, the negotiations of the Protocol on the East African Common Market were launched. The admission of Burundi and Rwanda to the EAC was effected in November 2006. The East African Court of Justice which, since its establishment in 2001 had not received a reference to it heard its first case in August 2006.

The Summit of the EAC Heads of State, which previously had been meeting at the rather leisurely pace of only one regular annual meeting, resolved to meet in two regular sessions, one dubbed a “working” Summit, apart from the extraordinary meetings of the Summit that would be called from time to time as the need arose. High Level Retreats (intense and dedicated consultative seminars) for the key organs and institutions of the Community, including the Permanent Secretaries Retreats were instituted. And there was a renewed demand and call to strengthen the outreach and oversight functions of the East African Legislative Assembly.

With appreciation of the need to streamline decision making and achieve rapid implementation of the regional programme, the EAC Partner States appointed Ministers solely responsible for EAC Affairs in their Cabinets and constituted them into a hands-on EAC Affairs Ministerial Sectoral Council. Similarly, the organizational structure of the

Community, under review since 1998, was finally adopted in November 2006 and implementation immediately effected with significant revamping of the professional staff establishment and expansion of the regional programme. On the whole, the activities in the regional projects and programmes, including implementation of regional infrastructure projects and the Lake Victoria Development Programme, were rejuvenated and intensified.

With this resurgence of the Community, the EAC also received robust media attention, particularly since the beginning of 2007 with the launching of the EAC Re-branding Project. Very instructively, the EAC Re-Branding Project accommodated the need to upgrade the EAC Information and Public Relations Office into the Directorate of Corporate Communications and Public Affairs.

Among the immediate accomplishments of the Re-Branding Project, the EAC Media Summit, bringing together top leadership of the EAC media) , was instituted in 2007 which has yielded tremendous positive response among the media fraternity as well as revamping of the centralized information support function of EAC communications at the Headquarters.

The EAC Re-Branding Project, today still a work in progress, is nevertheless a bold and ambitious scheme to enhance the visibility and promote a positive and dynamic image of the EAC. The project envisages substantial infusion of budgetary resources into the Directorate or Department of Corporate Communications and Public Affairs for, among others, establishment of the EAC Media Centre that will employ advanced technology in

its print and electronic media promotions. For instance, under the Re-Branding Project it is intended to install modern Radio and TV production and dissemination facility at the EAC headquarters that will link via satellite to regional and international radio and TV stations in providing quality, timely and in-depth reporting about the EAC, including live reporting of important events.

The EAC Re-Branding Project is thus located in a clear appreciation that within the globalizing world, the EAC is a powerful intervention to lift the East African region from centuries old marginalization and exploitation by better-organized communities in the world society.

The Re-branding project derives its rationale from the EAC Treaty's vision of transforming East Africa from its current state of underdevelopment into a fast modernizing region of the world. The Treaty further posits that the people are the actors and the beneficiaries of the regional integration process, from the decision making to the implementation stages of the regional projects and programmes.

When the people are aware of the Community, see it and feel its presence, they would appreciate and acknowledge its benefits. They would get deeply involved in the Community and participate in its projects and programmes as well as apply positive pressure on the leadership to ensure the viability and sustainability of the Community.

Marketing the cause : tools and techniques

Basing on the experience of the East African Community, effective corporate communications and marketing have a lot to do with things that one has to start with in developing communications/marketing strategy. Indeed, corporate or event communications programmes need to be designed and implemented with great attention to detail, style and method.

Structure and resources

First to start with, is taking an inventory of the requirements, and establishing the magnitude and scope of the task/intervention that needs to be mounted. It is only with such a clear appreciation that a relationship is then brought to bear systematically on the available resources, including the structural (human, financial and physical facilities/equipment) requirements in developing the communications intervention.

In this regard, a major challenge relates to structure. Suffice to state that successful communications employs highly skilled, competent and authoritative corporate or event communications Team. Invariably, such a communications Team is established at a clearly appropriate level within the event or organizational structure and could also be substantially outsourced with, however, a viable, optimal internal structure to anchor the outsourced activity.

The communications Team operates, of necessity, with ever greater professional autonomy, flexibility and appropriate resource levels. Most importantly, however, the communications Team is virtually linked to the corporate organization by the sharing of a clear common objective with the organization and its target publics. It is not enough that the organization adopts a corporate or event communications strategy and defines its vision and ideals; the organization (all its staff, from the CEO to the floor sweeper) must embrace the programme/vision/ideals. Otherwise, the strategy won't work and the objectives won't be achieved.

Message and branding

Second to start with, in launching communications/marketing interventions, is packaging of a clear message to be marketed based on the corporate objective (s). The corporate organization sets out by identifying what is the gap between it and the public, and what draws the corporate organization and its publics together. It is not enough simply to propose the idea or the intervention that is to be marketed, it is important that the contribution of the intervention to the public good is clearly elaborated and demonstrated.

To this extent, corporate communications ensures the media, market and management share the same message. Message management becomes the *raison d'être* of corporate communications and the wide variety of media its stock-in-trade. The idea is to employ a variety of media but focusing the single, overarching message. Is this message regional

integration and development as in the case of the EAC, or redemption and eternal life as in the case of Christianity?

A clear and consistent message (the Brand) therefore needs to flow from the organization. Corporate communications ensures this through its assigned role to facilitate but also regulate/modulate/calibrate/co-ordinate the quality and direction of the information/message flow (applying right focusing and response to the arising/evolving demands and conditions in the immediate and wider operating environment of the corporate organization as well as addressing the hopes, fears/suspensions).

Brand management, which has come to the fore in modern management communications, is essentially reputation management. What value is the organization/event (EAC) established or exists to serve/contribute and how is the organization going about delivering that value? (Reputation management). An important objective in branding is to humanize the corporate organization/ event. The corporation /event communications strategy does/achieves this by focusing on enhancing awareness, minimizing/eliminating misunderstanding as well as establishing preparedness to manage crisis and maximize the expectations and benefits of the organization.

In essence, the corporate organization/event promotes goodwill between it and a wide range of stakeholders. Brand management is therefore not only the most important but also the most complex activity of the corporate organization that aspires to market its relevance and effectiveness.

Crisis management

Third to start with is preparedness for crisis management. Most of the world's best laid plans come unstuck at some time or the other. In this regard, the corporate communications is geared to respond to the organization's broad challenge as well as preparedness for crisis management with regard to the perennial issues of peace, security and stability and, particularly at such times as we find ourselves in today of an emergent global food and fuel prices escalation and, indeed crisis.

In fact, it is in times of crisis and uncertainty (the Kenyan post-election violence and the situation of Burundi are cases in point) that the organization is able to demonstrate/test its viability and sustainability. This is the relevance test that faces any event or intervention marketing, whether by internal or external change agents. How, for instance, are external interests or interventions to be packaged in such a way that they meet this relevance test to promote the welfare and wellbeing goals of the greatest number of the East African people within the shortest time possible? That is the question.

To this end, the corporate organization (EAC) develops a visionary information content, approach and rationale that merge the objectives of the organization with the expectations of the publics. For instance, in the EAC, we need to position regional integration as a new and different approach from past initiatives, and emphasizing a modern, well thought out approach that will maximize the benefits to the greatest number, not in a millennium to

come, but within the shortest time possible, hence the staged process of EAC integration and the five-year development strategy cycles (as well as the resultant pressures to fast track and concretize the integration process).

Communications programme

Fourth to start with, is the elaboration of the communications programme in detailed processes/work plans, expressed in terms of continuous activities as well as time-lined activities. These objectives are further classified into short/immediate term (1-3 years); medium term (3-5 years); and long term (5-10 -20 yrs and beyond), depending on the life of the event/programme.

In sequencing the communications intervention programme, indeed setting out the communications work plan, the interventions are identified and assigned to the specific and wide range of actors and participants, from both the public and private sectors, in their various complementary roles, contribution to and promotion of the event. These range from the grassroots to national, regional and international levels, the general public and civil society, special groups (Youth, Women), etc , religious leaders, the media, the intellectual community, scholars, researchers, the political class, bureaucrats, local government authorities, community based organizations , the investing and business community and development partners.

Media relations

Finally, and fifth to start with, is recognition that the way the corporate organization manages its business determines how the media accommodates/ gets interested in the organization. This recognition is embraced, with the proviso, however, that also what the people (stakeholders) know about organizations, events or interventions (perception/reputation) stems less from the processes the organization engages and more from what the media puts out about the organization.

Depending therefore on effective corporate media management/relations, the media projects and promotes the corporate organization or event through positive media coverage. Competitive and, therefore, leading edge corporate organizations/events increasingly employ the wide variety of media to position themselves and advance corporate objectives. They charge their corporate communications with professional competence and capacity to harness the force and power of the media to positive corporate outcomes. On the whole, shrewd corporate communications have enthroned the media as “King and Queen”; and have viewed and valued them as their “bread and butter”.

In planning media relations, it is important to start with a clear inventory and understanding of the media landscape, taking into account the outreach effectiveness in terms of the literacy levels and language barriers, the digital divide, the communications/message target profiles.

Towards these ends, corporate communications and media relations strategies are devised that apply communications tools and techniques that both build outreach capacity and empower broad popular participation in effective communications.

Finally, friendly media approach is applied in increasingly advanced technology, through diversified media tools and techniques such as Press briefings/releases, Website, press conferences, reportage missions; billboards, various corporate image promotion items, advertisements and other public engagements and displays, field extension and outreach services and of course, as we now increasingly learn, Face book and Twitter. We don't know what will come next after these New Media.

Conclusion

Corporate communications, events or interventions marketing initiatives will usually have diverse and at the same time similar interests. How to bridge these disparities between policy makers and implementers and how to usher the broad publics into the green zone of the definitive communications and participation effort is the challenge that must always be anticipated and positively managed, right from the inception of the events or interventions marketing strategy.

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