

# Central Ideas of Public Relations: its place in the Strategic Health Communication Systems adopted by PLASCHEMA from 2019 -2023

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**Abstract:** *Effective communication is integral to carrying out health related endeavours goal to build a healthier future for everyone, no matter the place one is situated. Explore the central ideas of public relations (PR) and their implementation within the strategic health communication systems employed by PLASCHEMA from 2019-2023. The research employed a qualitative research methodology, combining the literature review with a case study approach. Within the stated period the research covered, the strategic health communication systems adopted by PLASCHEMA, the use of viable public relations played a crucial role in the success achieved by the agency. The paper offers modified PR models through which the effective communication can be used to enhance community engagement, leveraging media relations, Plateau (Nigerian) citizens awareness /orientation and effectively managing challenges that may come up from different quarters of the health insurance scheme.*

**Keywords:** Public Relation (PR), Strategic Health Communication Systems, Effective health communication, Community Engagement, Stakeholder Partnerships.

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## INTRODUCTION

One essential component of high impact service delivery in the healthcare sector is effective use of public relations (PR). Especially within societies or communities where education, adequate awareness and the need-to-know attitude of the people is limited as a result of different individual, cultural, religious and environmental circumstances. In such situations, the strategic application of PR principles for effective communication can enhance the delivery of health messages, manage public perception, and build trust between healthcare providers and the targeted communities they serve. Ikhioya (2019) opines that health communication is an accepted tool for promoting public health. Ikhioya's position supports the assertion that PR principles have been used to develop health communication principles used for various disease prevention and control strategies including advocacy for health issues, marketing health plans and products, educating patients about medical care or treatment choices, and educating consumers about healthcare quality.

There is therefore no gainsaying on the imperativeness of effective communication in transmitting these laudable goals to the target public, especially in facilitating the ultimate aim of achieving Universal Health Coverage (UHC) as one of the essential Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs3) and ensuring no one is left behind. The WHO strategic communications framework for effective communications (2017) also buttresses the need for effective strategic communication in the realization of Universal Health Coverage (UHC) by recognizing that effective, integrated and coordinated communication is integral to carrying out WHO's goal to build a better, healthier future for people all over the world. For obvious reasons, the approaches to this; techniques, audiences, and channels for communicating available products and activities may differ, the end goals are all the same: "To provide information, advice, and guidance to decision-makers (key audiences) to prompt action that will protect the health of individuals, families, communities and nations."(WHO, 2017)

### Background

Within the stipulated timeframe of this research, 2019 to be precise, Plateau State government established the State Contributory Health Care Management Agency known as Plateau State Contributory Healthcare Management Agency (PLASHEMA), to cater for the health needs of its citizens and achieve universal health coverage in the State. Primary among the objectives of the Agency is the mandate to regulate the cost of healthcare and ensure adequate distribution of healthcare facilities across the 17 located government areas of the State through Health insurance; a viable tool to accelerating access to quality and affordable health care and achieving UHC. To achieve the mandate, pioneer Director-General of the Agency and his team developed a blueprint and operational guidelines that was aimed at harnessing the public and private sector participation in the scheme. The blueprint exemplified the incorporation of PR within its health communication strategies, aiming to improve healthcare quality and accessibility in Plateau State, Nigeria in line with the WHO's (2017) framework organized according to its six principles for effective communications which are; accessible, actionable, credible and trusted, relevant, timely, understandable. The purpose of the encompassing blueprint is to provide elaborate clarity of

purpose in the description of the strategic approach expected to effectively cover for the global principles for health communication while also modifying them to adequately cater for the uniqueness of the Plateau people with specific reference to awareness, guidance and advice across a broad range of health issues: from regular health issues to risks and chronic health issues. This paper explores the central ideas of public relations (PR) and their implementation within the strategic health communication systems employed by PLASCHEMA by examining the practical applications its strategic blueprint. In specific terms, the study underscores the significance of integrating PR in enhancing public health initiatives, fostering stakeholder engagement, and promoting health literacy and its impact on healthcare outcomes.

### **Objectives**

Specific goals of the purpose of the study are to:

- a. Analyze the central ideas of public relations and their relevance to health communication.
- b. Shed light on Health Communication Strategy
- c. Examine the strategic health communication systems adopted by PLASCHEMA within the period under study.
- d. Justify the role of PR in the effectiveness of PLASCHEMA's health communication strategies within the period under study.
- e. Ascertain Key challenges affecting Strategic Health Communications of PLASCHEMA
- f. Suggest recommendations for optimizing PR practices within health communication systems.

### **Significance**

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform the design and implementation of effective PR to produce sustainable and measurable health communication strategies through the use of communication and information professionals. Also, the findings of this research can provide valuable insights to guide the development of more effective communication strategies that foster public trust, improve health literacy, and ultimately lead to better health outcomes in a developing country like Nigeria.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, combining the literature review with a case study approach. The literature review covers theoretical frameworks and empirical studies on public relations and health communication. The case study focuses on PLASCHEMA, analyzing its communication strategies through document analysis, media content review, and interviews with key stakeholders.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on the work of James E Grunig and Todd Hunt (1984) where they suggested that the best way to consider PR matters is through models that identify the central ideas of PR and how they are related to each other. One of the four models of Grunig and Hunt is the Two-way Symmetrical Model that has since become central in the practice of PR across the globe.

Therefore, this study adopted this model as it suitably provided support in understanding effective communication as a panacea for rational stability between an organization and its stakeholders. That is, the middle of the continuum is considered a “win-win” zone in which the organization and stakeholders (the target population) use communication to achieve a decision acceptable to both parties.

### Central Ideas of Public Relations

*Public relations involve the management of communication between an organization and its publics (Grunig and Hunt, 1984).*

In the realistic nature of any modern viable field/organization, the study of relationships within public relations has become increasingly pertinent; the use public relations (PR) strategies to increase their clients’ base and revenue are now innate. This is not different with the field of Health; the use of the best public relations models increases the chances of many of the outlined health programmes to succeed. Prominent among existing ones is the four public relations models, which elaborate on different managerial and organizational practices, developed by Grunig Hunt in 1984 in their seminal work, *Managing Public Relations*, identified testable variables to measure the quality of organizational relationships with their target population (clients). These four PR models; (a) the press agency, (b) public information, (c) two-way asymmetrical, and (d) two-way symmetrical, are vital building blocks for developing comprehensive communication strategies that cater for diverse organizational needs that aid organizations invent specifications, gambit, and stratagem to stay ahead. The key ideas underpinning these PR models in practical terms include:

**Model 1: Press Agency Model.** This center on Media Relation; the organisation uses media manipulation to shape the narrative deceptively (Silfwer, n.d.). In the context of healthcare, engaging with media outlets is vital for disseminating health information and shaping public perception. Newsom, Turk, and Kruckeberg (2013) emphasize the role of media in amplifying health messages and reaching broader audiences

**Model 2: Public Information Model.** All about public engagement and relationship management. Here, the organisation is practicing a one-way communication to disseminate information with little or no feedback from recipients; it tends to relay accurate information about a company but with no medium of hearing from the clients.

**Model 3: Two-Way Asymmetrical Model.** The organisation engages in two-way communication to persuade and establish power structures in a more “scientifically persuasive” way of communicating with key audiences. Here, organisations conduct research to have a better understanding of their clients believes, attitudes and behaviors, which guides them in developing their operations strategy. It is considered asymmetrical or imbalanced because the persuasive communication used in this model benefits organization more than clients.

**Model 4: Two-Way Symmetrical Model.** This model emphasizes dialogue and mutual understanding between an organization and its stakeholders (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The organisation engages in two-way communication to find common ground and mutual benefits. In the context of healthcare, it facilitates feedback mechanisms that can improve service delivery and patient satisfaction. The model is of the view that a PR practitioner should serve an intermediary between the organization and target population (clients) and not as a persuader. The PR practitioner negotiates a mutually beneficial situation for all parties involved for the good of all, hence the term

“symmetrical.” This is probably the most ethical method of all the models one that professionals should aspire to use in their everyday tactics and strategies because the aim of this model is dialogue not monologue and the feedback that the organization gathers is used to change organizational practices (Simpson, 2014).

### **Health Communication Strategy (HCS)**

According to Rural Health Information Hub (n.d.), the Community Guide defines health communication as: “The study and use of communication strategies to inform and influence individual and community decisions that enhance health.” Health communication often integrates components of multiple theories and models to promote positive changes in attitudes and behaviors. It includes verbal and written strategies to influence and empower individuals, populations, and communities to make healthier choices which involve the development of activities and interventions designed to positively change their health behaviors. Thus, strategic health communication involves the planned use of communication techniques to influence health behaviors and improve health outcomes. According to Rimal and Lapinski (2009), effective health communication strategies are grounded in behavioral theories and tailored to the needs of specific populations. . In addressing varied health and development issues, more targeted communication strategies are designed to make optimum use of available resources to achieve the planned results in a given context (Gupta, Jai and Yadav, 2021). This strongly implies that the significance of communication in health and development is well recognized because strategic communication informs, educates and influences. Rural Health Information Hub posits that effective health communication strategies include the following components:

- i. Use of research-based strategies to shape materials and products and to select the channels that deliver them to the intended audience.
- ii. Understanding of conventional wisdom, concepts, language, and priorities for different cultures and settings.
- iii. Consideration of health literacy, internet access, media exposure, and cultural competency of program audience.

To achieve the above stated, mediums such as social media (Facebook, Instagram, Tiktok, WhatsApp and YouTube), websites, billboards, newspaper adverts and articles, brochures on languages easily understood by the target population, television and radio commercials/ broadcasts, public service awareness through seminars, series of target population group discussions and practical interventions, health outreaches powered by certain free medical treatments and the likes. Since HCS’ primary aim is to increase people's knowledge in other to change their health attitudes and/or behaviors on risk perception, social, traditional and religious norms, using a combination the stated channels will impact on the health messages disseminated to individuals, small/large groups and community level campaigns to shape/ change or improve their health decisions or conditions.



### **PLASCHEMA's Strategic Health Communication Systems between 2019 and the first quarter of 2023**

Within the period covered by this study, PLASCHEMA as an organization primarily utilized the (a) corporate communication strategies for both internal and external communication (b) engagement with its stakeholders, which turned out to be a huge success of its health information dissemination programmes as observed by a Journalist, Marie-Therese Nanlong of Vanguard Newspaper in 2022 in her investigative article titled 'Plateau expands healthcare delivery with PLASCHEMA':

“The tides have now changed as PLASCHEMA, has taken steps to expand the scope of health care delivery at affordable rates... At its inception, many potential beneficiaries had raised concerns that deductions from their salaries might not be remitted to the agency and as a result resented the birth of the health outfit. But gradually, positive testimonies are coming out from the beneficiaries of PLASCHEMA, thereby drawing more and more enrollees into the scheme.”

An example of one of such beneficiaries is Dang Lina, a staff of the State Sports Council narrated how the scheme has been helping in settling her medical bills with ease:

“I was six months pregnant when I was diagnosed with fibroid. I had to go through Caesarean Section (CS) knowing how expensive it is... Ideally, a private hospital would charge like N180, 000 to N200, 000 for CS but because of PLASCHEMA, I ended up paying only N10, 000, which is 10 percent of the total bill issued to me.” (Nanlong, 2022)

In achieving this, PLASCHEMA employed a multi-faceted approach to health communication, integrating PR principles to attain its objectives. The foundation of multi-faceted approach is anchored on the deliberate measures in meeting its communication mandate as revealed by the efforts and systems put in place for strategic information dissemination. The agency operated a dedicated Unit under the office of the Director general called Communication for Development (C4D). Extracts from the C4D Strategic Plan of PLASCHEMA include:

- i. Making project PLASCHEMA the leading enterprise in the implementation of Government policies.
- ii. Securing media partnerships with relevant stakeholders
- iii. Simplifying the concept of State Social Health Insurance Scheme and the BHCPF through infographics and other easy to learn materials
- iv. Effective communication management of the Protocol Unit of the Agency
- v. To magnify to the public the efficiency and effectiveness of the Agency towards achieving its mandate to the public
- vi. To serve as gatekeepers for the agency
- vii. Enhancing effective communication within the agency
- viii. Produce world class media content across traditional and New media platforms
- ix. Proper branding of the Agency

This strategic plan spurred and guided the agency to engage in the following:

1. Community Engagement: PLASCHEMA prioritized community involvement in its healthcare programs. Through the use of community stakeholders, the agency organized

town hall meetings, health fairs, and focus group discussions. The agency practically fostered the two-way communication strategy because it helped them to gather valuable feedback from the public (target population).

2. **Media Campaigns:** By utilizing various media platforms through press media relations and other forms of advocacy that opens communication with feedback to and from the publics, PLASCHEMA conducted awareness campaigns on health issues such as immunization, maternal health, and disease prevention. These campaigns leverage traditional media (radio, television) and digital media (social media, websites) to reach diverse audiences. A good example is one of PLASCHEMA's baseline survey on the disease burden, universal health coverage, health seeking behavior, knowledge attitude and perception of Plateau Residents on Social Health Insurance carried out in 2021. A research/campaign which provided a practical illustration of the integration of PR in health communication. The research/campaign aimed to increase Health Insurance coverage among All Plateau citizens, especially the vulnerable groups of rural dwellers in Plateau State. Key PR strategies employed included:
  - a. **Media Engagement:** Press releases, radio jingles, and television interviews were used to educate the public on the benefits of Social Health Insurance and address common misconceptions.
  - b. **Community Outreach:** Mobile clinics and community health workers were deployed to rural areas to facilitate access to Health Insurance services and engage directly with community members.
3. **Stakeholder Partnerships:** PLASCHEMA collaborates with government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), political stakeholders, religious leaders and community leaders to enhance the reach and impact of its health initiatives by endorsing the campaign and encouraging participation. These partnerships are instrumental in resource mobilization and capacity building. An example of this is the aggressive sensitization campaign for all state and national assembly members with a view to spur them in subscribing for premium health insurance packages for the indigent members of their communities. The campaign resulted in a significant increase in health insurance, this strategy helped in addressing a lot of diseases ravaging rural communities, demonstrating the effectiveness of PR strategies in achieving public health goals and a step further in achieving UBC.
4. **Crisis Management:** In response to health crises, such as the infringement of a client's right to healthcare services in any health center that is in contract with PLASCHEMA, the agency implements crisis communication strategies that ensure timely and accurate information dissemination. The agency's transparency and responsiveness have been pivotal in managing public anxiety and misinformation.

Based on the aforementioned, it is evident that the agency through its communication strategies sets out to maintain cooperation and like-mindedness with the general public and its targeted stakeholders, in concordance with the model underpinning this study, in which both the organization and its publics are constantly exchanging information with mutually reinforcing feedback mechanism that allows for pertinent information to be disseminated and clarifications

provided in areas of ambiguity or perceived information deficit so that it can be addressed appropriately. Furthermore, the examples provided also confirms that indeed the agency is reaching out to the targeted population through the media and direct advocacy engagements with stakeholders to ensure that proper channels are accessible and operational for the glide of information to the requisite stakeholders to nurture a balanced relationship, and partnership proponents on health insurance issues as individuals and communities strive to attain UHC through the services of the agency.

Underscoring the emphasis upheld by The WHO strategic communications framework for effective communications (2017), recommending that effective strategic communication is essential to realizing UHC, the agency ensured that the role of stakeholders in boosting the process was adequately established. The agency understood that for a people oriented social service like Health Insurance to be effectively rooted, one of the major attributes of successful social health campaigns is acceptability and ownership by the target population. As result, the communication think tank of the agency prognosticated that progress toward UHC required local ownership and customized strategies for specific contexts in which diverse stakeholders must be engaged including political leaders, popular community members, leaders, community health workers, influencers and gatekeepers, health care purchasers, providers, patients, suppliers, and civil society groups and each audience requiring tailored communication approaches to change their knowledge towards health insurance by boosting the advocacy drive of the agency towards behaviour and attitudinal change and adopting financial risk protection for citizens. To this end the two- way symmetrical model was put into play as there was constant exchange of information and expectations between the agency and its stakeholders on unique proper communication strategies as the success and sustainability of the Health Insurance objectives among communities and individuals for enrolment and keying –into the available services to better their health conditions largely depends communication pattern.

The field data from the Agency's 2001 baseline survey is rife with evidence from the respondents who by way of feedback on the interviews and discussions supported the communicative efforts of the Agency in relating with stakeholders in meetings and their speed of response to the needs of groups and communities. The research revealed that the Agency made efforts to mobilize communities, linking them up with facilities and available services for them to access and improve their health conditions, in line with the agency's slogan of 'leaving no one behind.' Thus, within the timeframe of this study, the PLASCHEMA had a robust communication work-plan which involved the use of various channels for strategic information dissemination with its publics while also recognizing the need for internal communication to address industrial harmony within the Agency

### **Challenges of Strategic Health Communications of PLASCHEMA**

In every organization, it's best to understand every target population's behavior and attitude before adopting public relations models. That is because a wrong model choice may be impractical for achieving stated goals. Between 2019 and first quarter of 2023, based on the realities and time-bound placements, PLASCHEMA significantly made reasonable attempts to understand their



target population's prospect behavior and attitude before using the public relations model it adopted, bearing in mind that a wrong model choice will be impractical for all parties involved. Therefore, in its quest to effectively carry out its mandate, the identified fundamental issues that bedeviled the Agency in effectively carrying out her Strategic Health Communications are Inadequate funding, non- recognition Communication sub-unit as a management function and a full department of its own with independent programmes and budget in the agency, and insufficient skilled manpower in the operations of the agency in the aspect of communication and information professionalism. The reality is that most of the employees are unskilled in that aspect and they were deployed without rigorous training to fit into the job and provide the needed technical expertise required. This challenge has affected productivity and outputs for communication programs of the agency at one point or the other. There is also the challenge of significant apathy on the part of citizens to enroll into the scheme despite the entire advocacy efforts of the agency; meaning that all the positive grounds that have been covered would be much more with a better enlightened populace. Their reasons range from religious, economic, religious, cultural and environmental beliefs. The Agency also needs to work out an evolving and better inclusive participatory strategy for health communication to enable it reach out to the deep rural populace, training their indigent citizens so as to engage them through their local languages/cultures to promote acceptability for any outlined program to enhance their ability to be part of health insurance.

### **Recommendation**

To entrench effective health insurance communication through PLASHEMA, the Agency needs to:

- a. Diversify its communication approaches to be more inclusive
- b. Adopt strategies to step down their campaigns in local cultures and languages to reach the people that are not literate or intermediately literate.
- c. Be deliberate about the advocacy and collaborative efforts through community and religious leaders that will serve as gate keepers, who will intern convince the citizens
- d. Upgrade the Communication Unit to the Status of full- fledged department
- e. Prioritise funding of the communication unit to enable it meet its operational demands
- f. Develop an employee policy for training and manpower capacity building
- g. Hire the services of information and public relations consultants to help her manage her strategic health communication to enable them operate within best practices.

### **CONCLUSION**

The core aspect of public communication is to create/improve awareness and bridge gaps of understanding among the uninformed and less informed. Within the stated period the research covered, the strategic health communication systems adopted by PLASHEMA, the use of viable public relations played a crucial role in the success achieved by the agency. It enhanced the agency's ability in the fostering of community engagement, leveraging media relations, Plateau citizens awareness /orientation and effectively managing challenges that came up from different

quarters of the parties involved. Thereby improving the Agency's pedigree to promote health literacy and improve healthcare outcomes.

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