

Examining Effective Public Relations Strategies and Tactics for Building and Managing Brand Reputation Online

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Abstract

The public relations (PR) landscape has shifted dramatically in the digital age. The study researched the strategies and tactics that drive online success for some brands in Nigeria with the overarching goal of empowering others to traverse the digital terrain adeptly. The researcher employed a multi-source data collection instrument of document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and observation to uncover valuable insights. Drawing from the Knowledge Gap theory, the study investigated how certain brands bridge the knowledge gap nearly effortlessly while their counterparts wobble. The paper employed qualitative research design and purposive sampling technique, strategically picking four successful ones and uncovering the strategy drivers, catapulting them to success online. The findings were quite revealing. Visual storytelling, user-generated content, and real-time engagement were found to be the key brains behind the online success of brands in Nigeria in building trust and authenticity. In the end, the researcher made valuable recommendations to empower brands that may be wobbling in their online PR efforts.

Keywords: Public Relations, Brand Reputation, Online Reputation Management, Strategies, Tactics

Introduction

The new media powered by the internet has presented golden opportunities for modern-day public relations practice. Opportunities abound for brands in this era in no small measure. Large or small, brands can now establish not just a presence but also contribute hugely to their bottom line in the digital space (Adegbuyi & Taiwo, 2023; Dwivedi et al., 2021). Interestingly, as the digital landscape simulates the major avenue for target audience interaction, it has become indispensable for digital marketers of companies to master the art and science of digital public relations to conquer the realm (Kraus et al., 2022).

Brands are left with no other choice than to respond to the fast-changing consumer behaviour in the technology revolution of the internet. Engagement strategies are no longer a walkover but must be thought through, planned, and implemented with alacrity to navigate the dynamic digital realm. (Busca & Bertrandias, 2020; Joshi, 2023; Lim, 2022; Shahbaznezhad, 2021; Wibowo, 2020). There is, therefore, a need to uncover the magic wand some outstanding brands wield to succeed in the online space with the overarching goal of equipping brands who, hitherto, are not doing well online, to begin to traverse the online landscape, adeptly.

Omaka et al. (2023) confirm that this is more than imperative now that everyone including the target audience, whom brands seek, live online. By probing the online success of brands in Nigeria, it will be insightful to uncover the top-notch strategies and tactics, driving their online PR moves. The online PR space, notable for its growing networking and connectivity ultimately serves as an interesting backdrop for examining how companies achieve branding with the toolkit of online PR (Barrera & Shah, 2023).

Statement of Problem

Today, presence and engagement have become key definitive factors in the online realm. This means that some brands in Nigeria, due to their brick-and-mortar traditions, may face more than difficulty in navigating the virtual space (Ndinojuo et al., 2016; Okocha & Ojochide 2023).

The researcher has observed keenly the trends in online PR over time and noticed that while many brands are doing exceptionally online, others remain aloof, apparently befuddled about the winning strategies and tactics that drive the successful ones. No doubt, a lot of challenges accompany the internet times, especially for the e-PR practice. While the internet seems to be that sky that supposed would house all the stars, the strategy and tactics drivers remain a hard nut to crack particularly in the Nigerian market. However, the virtual world also brews with more than a handful of toolkits and techniques to help brands win effortlessly, online (Dziewornu-Norvor, 2022; Ju et al., 2021; Ozgen & Saydam 2022). No wonder,

many brands are thriving online, while their counterparts just look on not because they do not want to but because they do not even know what it takes and how to go about cultivating meaningful relationships with their audiences who have now migrated, online.

It is against this backdrop that this research sought to uncover the approaches that have been driving some brands to online prominence with the overarching goal of handing over the skillset to others who still wobble in their online PR efforts.

Research Questions

1. What key online PR strategies do successful brands engage in Nigeria?
2. What are the tactics within the strategies?
3. Can any brand adapt the winning strategies in their unique context?

Significance of the study

By beaming the searchlight on winning online PR strategies of successful brands in Nigeria, the study shall contribute not just to the body of knowledge surrounding digital PR and brand management but ultimately to equip brands with the complete toolkit of online PR management to drive meaningful connections and bottom-line.

Literature Review

Fundamentally, the internet brought with it a critical revolution that ended up reshaping the public relations profession and every other discipline for that matter. In an increasingly

interconnected world, brands in the Nigerian market are compelled to birth key online strategies and tactics to help position them as a go-to in their industries. By way of contextual definition, online PR strategy has to do with deliberate planning and implementation of communications and/or campaigns to woo the Nigerian audience who live online, nowadays (Ajiboye, 2022; Wilcox et al., 2023). Tactics here may be seen as the rungs of the ladder (strategy). Like the rungs to a ladder, tactics encompass the specific actions or activities used to drive the set PR objectives. Igben and Ilaya (2021) agree that notable tactics include content development, brand influencers, thought leadership opportunities, and others.

Scholarly works have been done on the influence of online public relations on brand reputation quotient, one research by Olayinka and Ewuola (2019) reveals an upbeat correlation between greatly implemented digital PR programmes and increased brand awareness, which resulted in impressive social media engagement rates and higher website visits. Akinola and Okunade (2016) demonstrated how tactical online PR communications resulted in positive brand perception, driving both audience confidence and loyalty. Indeed, the internet revolution has necessitated innovative strategies in the digital PR realm. Saarikko et al. (2020) look at the indispensability of social media for brand-consumer interactivity, harping on the need for real-time engagement and tailored content. Also, Orji-Egwu and Oyeleke (2019) explore the role of user-generated

content in promoting community and brand authenticity.

Notably, while online PR success is palpable, some brands in Nigeria are bedeviled with different challenges. Onyemечи and Monday (2023) investigate the complexity when it comes to aligning online PR approaches with brand core values, sermonising the urgent need for uniformity in messaging in both online and offline PR efforts. Obayi and Onwude (2018) research the challenges the Nigerian different cultural nuances pose, emphasising the need for culturally-sensitive strategies in planning and execution. Similarly, because the Nigerian online PR market is unique in its ways, Ikpe and Olise (2010) examine the influence of locally relevant content, stressing that e-PR planning should consider Nigerian traditions and values. Ngondo (2019) studies the role of influencer partnership in the African context, showing how the emerging brand influencer subsector can be leveraged for reach and believability.

Despite a growing body of literature on online PR strategy and branding, research around tactical strategies for online PR success in the Nigerian context remains limited. This study seeks to address this gap by analysing successful cases in Nigeria extracting insights responsible for their overall PR success, online.

Theoretical Framework

This paper shall be anchored on the Knowledge Gap Theory. Developed by Tichenor, et al (1970), the capsule summary of the Knowledge Gap Theory is that the level of knowledge or no

knowledge, people have may be as a result of their level of media exposure. This theory becomes particularly important in the context of this research, which sees varying degrees of success among brands in their online PR endeavours. While some brands have successfully harnessed the online PR age for their brand equity, some others do not even know the effective things to do, rendering their online PR efforts and results, unimpressive. By pegging this research on the Knowledge Gap Theory, this study shall examine how certain brands bridge the knowledge gap effectively to offer valuable insights to faltering brands, helping them to traverse the digital terrain with sagacity and efficiency.

Methodology

The research design is qualitative to help investigate and analyse winning online PR strategies, tactics, and their effective implementation among successful brands, online. Qualitative case studies are well-suited for in-depth examinations of real-world happenings, allowing for an exploration of complex strategies in their natural habitat (Priya, 2021). Data will be collected through multiple sources to triangulate findings and enhance the validity of the study.

The thematic analysis shall be employed to analyse the collected data. Transcripts of interviews, documented content, and real-time observations will be noted to help identify recurring themes related to successful online PR strategies, tactics, and implementation processes.

At the time of conducting this research, no source could put a figure to

the number of brands in Nigeria with online presence. Therefore, the population of interest for this research comprises Nigerian brands operating across diverse industries in the digital landscape. For the sampling, the purposive sampling technique will be employed to select four prominent Nigerian brands that have demonstrated success in their online PR efforts. The selection will encompass brands from key sectors such as fashion, food, health, and tech.

Data will be collected using up to three instruments (Semi-structured interview, document analysis, and observations) just to be sure of eliciting the exact strategies and tactics, that the selected brand and their representatives are using in their online PR efforts, further, enhancing the validity of the study. Online content from the selected brands' social media platforms and other digital channels will be collected and interpreted. This includes posts, articles, videos, etc. that demonstrate the brands' online PR strategies and tactics. Note that the analysis shall be looking at the messaging, techniques and recurring themes, etc. Also, the researcher shall observe the brands online in real-time across their social media platforms to reveal insights into the brands' engagement with their audience as well as how they respond to comments and even the type of social media updates they share.

Furthermore, to elicit the PR strategy and tactics the chosen brands leverage to win online, the researcher shall interview key personnel from the brands' PR and digital marketing teams to help provide some insights.

Ethical Considerations: Ethical guidelines will be adhered to throughout the research process. In line with this, interview participants will be protected during data presentation to maintain confidentiality.

Brief background of brands

Yomi Casual – the grandmaster of influencer partnerships

(<https://www.instagram.com/yomicasual/?hl=en>)

Yomi Casual is a fast-fashion brand in Nigeria that has gained significant attention through its online PR efforts. Riding on the back of his brother, Ayo Makun, a popular comedian widely known as AY, Yomi's clothing line went viral so fast, that he is still shocked. He was once enthused that he had become a fashion designer by accident. His key tactics include influencer partnerships, content diversity, and engagement. Since Yomi is very popular, his clothes are worn by the giants of the music and film industry, such as IK Ogbonna, Alex Ekubo, Timaya, Chidi Mokeme, Chioma Chukwuka, Uti Nwachukwu, Ramsey Nouah Jnr, Seyi Law, Bovi, Alibaba, 9ice, AY, Desmond Elliot, etc. Yomi Casual strategically aligns the brand with popular influencers who resonate with their target audience, allowing the brand to tap into the influencers' existing follower base to generate buzz.

Health line – Leveraging Thought Leadership

(<https://www.healthline.com/>)

Healthline with its slogan “Medical information and health advice you can trust” is a health and wellness brand in Nigeria that has built a strong online

presence through effective online PR strategies especially with the thought leadership tactic, establishing itself as an expert, creating high-quality, well-researched content. Healthline provides expert advice on health and wellness topics and content. The health blogger creates informative blog posts, infographics, and videos that address common health concerns.

TechCabal – Building Online Community

(<https://techcabal.com/>)

TechCabal is a future-focused e-publication out to serve the African tech aficionados, in-depth. TechCabal prides itself in building its community via webinars, going LIVE which is an opportunity for Q&A and tech-related online contests that help the brand to foster interaction and drive traffic to the website. Their content strategies include interactive Content, where they encourage audience participation and feedback; and User-Generated Content, where they encourage readers to share their tech-related experiences, thoughts, and even product reviews. Another strategy TechCabal engages in is consistency, where the team maintains a consistent posting schedule and actively responds to comments and messages.

Sisi Yemmie – The pan social media food leader

(https://twitter.com/Sisi_Yemmie?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor)

Yemisi Sophie Odusanya, affectionately known as Sisi Yemmie, is a Nigerian food and lifestyle blogger. A platform where passion for Nigerian nutrition, recipe development, and food

photography have enjoyed a robust online presence since launch. Sisi Yemie has been able to launch a presence nearly effortlessly across the internet landscape. The brand is doing well in the search engines, YouTube, X (former Twitter), Instagram, Facebook, etc.

Data Presentation/Analysis

Document Analysis

Brand 1: Yomi Casual

- Visual/graphic Storytelling:
 - Instagram posts display models including the founder and his brother AY, wearing the brand's clothing in picturesque settings, evoking a sense of aspiration.
 - Videos featuring behind-the-scenes of the Yomi Casual creativity procedure are also seen.
- User-Generated Content:
 - To give its followers a sense of belonging, Yomi Casual encourages customers to share photos of themselves or short clips dressed in its apparel with dedicated hashtags for discoverability.

Brand 2: TechCabal

- Visual Storytelling:
 - First hand, YouTube videos reveal the benefits and features of new tech products, showcasing them in real-life scenarios to enhance consumer believability

- User-Generated Content:
 - Tech aficionados upload videos and are seen unboxing and reviewing brands' products, which all contribute to a sense of authenticity and brand equity.

Brand 3: Healthline

- Visual Storytelling:
 - Pinterest boards demonstrate attractive infographics and other visuals on health tips, which resonates with the medium's visual-friendly nature.
- User-Generated Content:
 - Readers can be seen sharing their health and fitness journeys on Instagram, which creates trust and showcases real-life results.

Brand 4: Sisi Yemie

- Visual Storytelling:
 - Facebook videos capture the founder and other chefs preparing sumptuous dishes, engaging viewers through the art of cooking.
- User-Generated Content:
 - The X (former Twitter) manager encourages food enthusiasts to share their culinary skills on the brand's X page, contributing to a vibrant online community.

Common Themes and Insights: The steady use of eye-friendly storytelling and user-generated content has emerged as a key strategy/tactic among brands. Apparently, visuals can be trusted to effectively convey brand messages, helping the target audience to have an emotional connection with the brand. Also, user-generated content has this special way of fostering a sense of belonging in the target audience, which invariably helps to convert the target audience into advocates. To this effect, the effectiveness of this tactic is no longer in doubt.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Brand 1: Yomi Casual

Interviewee: PR Manager

- "Our tactic aims at brandishing our unique designs through visuals, helping us to record a lot of traffic and impression in our posts/updates. This gives us a relative advantage in the market. In the age of the internet, people love visuals so much and this strategy sets us apart from other brands."
- "In-house, we ensure that our tactics align with our core values. At Yomi Casual, compatibility is crucial. We want our online PR efforts to resonate with our audience's preferences and expectations, offline."

Brand 2: TechCabal

Interviewee: Digital Marketing Specialist

- "Since we live online, our strategy focuses on creating content to simplify complex tech concepts. This to us is an

advantage as the pain points of our target audience become addressed using this simple approach."

- "Compatibility for us is important. Our tactics are always in sync with our brand's identity. If it doesn't align, it won't feel authentic to our readers and product reviewers."

Brand 3: Healthline

Interviewee: Marketing Director

- "The health industry is quite sensitive so we ensure that we provide evidence-based health tips. That strategy to us is our relative advantage. Naturally, people will gravitate to credible sources. This is what set us apart from the flood of health, wellness, and lifestyle blogs out there."
- "In planning, we give way for compatibility which ensures that our tactics are in sync line with our brand's commitment to genuine lifestyle tips and insights. For us at Healthline, it's about building trust with our audience."

Brand 4: Sisi Yemmie

Interviewee: PR Coordinator

- "Our strategy's relative advantage is in sharing the joy of cooking through videos. People connect emotionally with food. It's what sets us apart from other kitchen brands."

- "Our tactics must be compatible with our brand's passion for culinary experiences. It's about making sure our approach resonates with food enthusiasts."

Common Themes and Insights: The chats with key personnel from the brands' PR and digital marketing teams were an eye-opener into the brainstorming and planning process of the chosen online PR strategies, tactics, and implementation. Notably, recurring themes emerged across the interviews, highlighting relative advantages and compatibility in the approach. Interviewees emphasized how their chosen strategies offered unique benefits that distinguished their brands from competitors. Compatibility with the brand's identity was another shared theme, underlining the importance of ensuring that online PR efforts align with core values and resonate with the target audience.

Observations

Brand 1: Yomi Casual - Instagram

- Multiple instances of brand representatives responding to comments with personalised messages, often using emojis to convey warmth.
- Quick response times to customer inquiries, averaging 15 minutes between comment posting and brand reply.
- An interactive contest encouraging users to share their styling ideas using a dedicated

hashtag, resulting in a surge of user-generated content.

Brand 2: TechCabal - YouTube

- Notable engagement through "heart" reactions and thoughtful replies to video comments, showcasing a commitment to audience feedback.
- Live Q&A sessions hosted after product launch videos, an apparent tactic to allow viewers to ask questions and get real-time responses.
- Employment of end-screen surveys to feel the pulse of viewers on preferred tech topics for future video content.

Brand 3: Healthline - Instagram and Facebook

- Consistent engagement with users sharing their fitness achievements, with the brand showing genuine appreciation for customers' progress.
- Polls and quizzes in Instagram Stories, encourage followers to interact and test their wellness knowledge.
- Sharing of insightful health-related articles from authoritative sources, sparking conversations among followers.

Brand 4: Sisi Yemie - Website, Twitter

- Regular retweets of follower-generated content featuring homemade recipes, clearly give

the followers a sense of belonging.

- Responses to tweets with personalised cooking tips, contributing to a helpful and informative online presence.
- Utilization of "Caption This" competition, inviting users to create humorous captions for culinary images.

Common Themes and Insights: Real-time observations of the brands' social media interactions unveiled a strong emphasis on engagement and responsiveness. The brands demonstrated proactive efforts to connect with their audiences, fostering a sense of community and trust through personalised interactions. The observations consistently showcased the brands' commitment to engagement and interactivity. Personalised responses to comments and inquiries contributed to a welcoming online environment. The use of contests, polls, and user-generated content encouraged audience participation, amplifying brand visibility and fostering a sense of community. These tactics underscore the importance of real-time engagement in enhancing brand-consumer relationships.

Discussion of Findings

A prominent recurring theme across the cases in point is the use of visual storytelling and user-generated posts as effective online PR strategies. All four brands employed visual elements, such as images and video clips, to leverage their brand narratives which helped to

evoke emotions, and empathy in the target audience. This is in sync with a major trend in online marketing, where visual content has proven to be highly engaging (Mojaye & Ogunyombo, 2022; Sule & Ridwanullah, 2021). The consistent use of visual storytelling suggests that brands recognise the power of visual elements in capturing the attention of their target audience. Visual content can convey messages quickly and effectively, making it a valuable tool in the online PR arsenal. The emotional connection evoked through visual storytelling can leave a lasting impact on consumers, influencing their perceptions of the brand. Furthermore, the emphasis on user-generated content is a signal of the importance of authenticity in online PR management. By encouraging their public to share their experiences and become brand advocates, brands key into the trust that consumers place in peer recommendations (Yujie et al., 2022). User-generated content not only fosters a sense of community but also extends the reach of brand messages.

The semi-structured interviews shed light on the decision-making process behind the chosen online PR strategy adoption. The interview participants consistently harped on the concepts of relative advantage and compatibility. These brands recognised that their strategies needed to offer unique benefits and align with their brand identities to resonate with their public. No doubt, compatibility with brand core values is crucial for authenticity and long-term brand-consumer relationships. When strategies and tactics align with a brand's core

values, they not only feel more genuine but also build trust with consumers (Tandoh, 2020). This agreement ensures that online PR efforts resonate with the preferences and expectations of the target audience.

Also, the real-time observations of the social media interactions revealed a solid focus not just on engagement but also on responsiveness. Brands actively interacted with their audiences through tailor-made responses to each of their comments. Online contests, shared polls and follower-generated content played a central role in strengthening brand visibility and engendering a sense of community. Placing priority on real-time engagement aligns with the evolving nature of digital PR. Brands recognise the importance of building relationships with their audiences by actively participating in conversations and addressing customer inquiries promptly. This approach not only enhances brand-consumer relationships but also contributes to brand trust (Okonkwo et al., 2020).

Nurturing a sense of community through contests, polls, and user-generated content can lead to brand advocacy and word-of-mouth marketing (Ogunmuyiwa, 2022). Brands that create opportunities for consumers to actively participate and contribute to brand-related content can benefit from increased brand visibility and a loyal customer base. All these insights say so much. They provide a roadmap for brands seeking to optimise their online PR endeavours and stand out in the highly competitive digital landscape. Note that the findings are in total agreement with other studies (Ewuola &

Olayinka, 2019; Akinola & Okunade, 2016; Saarikko et al., 2020) among others, who found that tactical, user-friendly digital PR communications remain a sine qua non for driving audience confidence and trust.

Conclusion

Indeed, the research journey into examining the winning online PR strategies, tactics, and their effective implementation for Nigerian brands has illuminated key insights that hold relevance for both practitioners and scholars in the digital marketing domain. In an era characterised by digital transformation, where the virtual realm serves as a primary avenue for consumer interactions, brands should not ignore the power of Visual Storytelling and User-Generated Content. Also, successful brands recognise the need to offer unique benefits through their strategies while ensuring alignment with their brand identities and core values which helps build trust. Again, real-time engagement with audiences emerged as a central theme in the observations. Brands actively engaged with their customers, responding to comments and inquiries promptly. Contests, polls, and user-generated content facilitated community building, enhancing brand visibility and fostering brand trust. Brands that prioritize community engagement create opportunities for brand advocacy and word-of-mouth marketing.

Recommendations

Building on the research findings, the following recommendations are offered to brands and practitioners alike, who

still struggle to excel in the ever-evolving terrain of online PR:

1. **Engage Visual Storytelling:** Leverage visuals in your storytelling tactics. Visuals in digital PR outreaches have been found to captivate audiences and evoke emotional connections.
2. **Encourage User-Generated Content:** Urge your public to share their own experiences and testimonials to add authenticity to your online presence and buoy up a sense of community among your target audience.
3. **Ensure your strategies speak your Brand Identity:** Align your online PR strategies with your brand's identity and core values. This improves authenticity and trust quotient, which are all indispensable components of effective online PR management.
4. **Make Real-Time Engagement a top priority:** Devote time to real-time interaction with your online audience. Go LIVE regularly. Quickly respond to comments, inquiries, and direct messages (DM).
5. **Set up polls on a regular basis:** Make your target audience part and parcel of online PR efforts. Create opportunities for audience participation through contests, polls, and collaborative content.
6. **Measure. Adapt:** Do not leave measurement alone. Every step of the way, continuously monitor

the impact of your digital PR outreaches via key performance indicators (KPIs) like engagement rates, Number of followers, and even website visits and traffic. Therefore, ensure that you adapt your strategies/tactics based on data-driven insights for effectiveness.

7. **Staff Training:** Invest in training your staff to equip your PR and digital marketing teams with today's skills and knowledge needed to excel in online PR. Online PR management is not a walk-over as many think. Your team members should be properly trained in the art and science of content creation, social media management, and online customer service and engagement.
8. **Stay updated:** Above all, be updated on industry trends and emerging skills and technologies in the field of digital marketing such as Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), and new search engine ranking algorithms. The digital world is dynamic, and staying current is more than necessary if you want to have a competitive edge.

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