

CORPORATE REPUTATION MANAGEMENT AND THE GROWTH OF COOPERATIVE SOCIETIES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The ideal approach of corporate reputation management possesses essential tools and strategies that can transform challenged image and public perception of any organization including self-help and profit-oriented organizations such as cooperative societies. The rising reputation related challenges of cooperative organisations due to official corruption, leadership tussles and other issues of mismanagement have continued to undermine their productivity and growth in Nigeria; these challenges are issues that corporate reputation management (CRM) can manage especially from the perspective of reinforcing the shared values and principles it has with cooperative organization that include integrity (honesty, truthfulness), character and trust, equality, economic democracy and social responsibility. On the premise of this concord of values, the paper explores how CRM tools, particularly via its priorities, can be activated and institutionalized into the affairs of cooperative societies, which hitherto lacked effective application of such tools, in order to forestall and control the effects of poor reputation that jeopardize their growth and success in Nigeria. This paper, therefore, recommends the introduction of corporate reputation management skills through workshops for elected executives and officials of cooperatives, and the incorporation of the firm principles and values of CRM as invaluable corporate asset in the constitution of cooperative organizations in Nigeria.

Keywords: Corporate, Reputation, Management, Growth, Cooperatives

Introduction

The challenge of procuring and sustaining goodwill is part of the reason many organizations including cooperative societies do not last or are unable to grow and expand over time. Reputation (goodwill) is a critical asset in attaining success in business, and meeting organizational goals and objectives, especially in a competitive economy such as Nigeria. This is the reason increasing number of corporate organizations and governments deploy huge human, financial and material resources to build and manage corporate reputation (Nkwocha, 2016). Corporate reputation management has been an invaluable and critical asset for corporate organization to seek increased productivity and growth in this era of many challenges confronting developing economies, including Nigeria. Corporate reputation management involves building and sustaining a favourable, reputable and positive image for an organization or government through effective management of its corporate identity and image. It also involves careful formulation and implementation of a sound corporate strategy to ensure positive corporate performance, which in turn brings about positive image and positive public perception (Nwosu, 1996).

Corporate reputation is a primary concern of any serious organization that hopes for greater productivity, and this is evident in many corporate organizations, particularly in the developing economies where numerous issues continue to undermine organizational growth. In Nigeria, cooperative societies have greatly enhanced opportunities of economic leverages and empowerment for their members, and have continued to serve as concrete sources of economic growth and expansion for individuals and organizations (Onosode, 2023). As corporate organizations, cooperative societies tend to encounter, in a peculiar way, the intriguing challenge of managing its image and public perception because of its self-help and people centered posture

that creates a picture of greater public assessment and monitoring of their activities and programmes. Despite this particular challenge that is borne out of the nature of cooperative societies, which brings up pressure on its image management, other issues that border on public perception of its management often come to the fore. A cooperative society is basically an association of persons who have voluntarily joined together to achieve a common end through the formation of a democratically controlled organization, making equitable contributions to the capital required and accepting a fair share of the risks and benefits of the undertaking in which members actively participate (Okoye, 2018). From the above definition, cooperative societies are people-oriented organizations whose activities are often under public scrutiny and observation and as such need to raise efforts towards maintaining good corporate image and public perception, particularly in present-day Nigeria where there are numerous reputation related issues bedvelling cooperative societies, and undermining their corporate existence and growth. Obi (2019) observes that, “many cooperative societies are increasingly grappling with issues of conducting credible election of officers, corruption allegations and charges against executives, as well as poor management of their corporate affairs in Nigeria”.

Ejima (2019) states that “there are growing issues that border on the reputation and public image of cooperatives that require proper strategies to put them under control if positive public perception and image of cooperatives are to be achieved and sustained”. Many cooperative societies are these days having issues of embezzlement of funds by elected officers, election irregularities and manipulations that sometimes bring unpopular executives and other issues that are antithetical to good corporate reputation and public image (Okoye, 2018). This paper, therefore, looks into how corporate reputation management tools and strategies can help to revolutionize the activities and enterprise of cooperative societies, and put them in better position to constructively manage both internal and external factors that pose significant negative impacts on their public image and reputation, which invariably influences their organizational growth.

A cursory look at the status of some organizations in terms of their public posture and image depicts their outright failure or inability to adequately apply corporate reputation management skills in their operations (Ugwuanyi, 2020); and this situation may have led to worsening conditions of affairs in the areas of integrity, social responsibility, productivity and positive corporate image. The concepts and realities of cooperative organization and corporate reputation are somewhat intertwined by their shared values and principles. The key values of cooperative societies, which are rooted in the heart of committed cooperators that include honesty, openness, social responsibility, equality, economic democracy and caring for others are in consonance with the fundamental ethics of corporate reputation that enunciate integrity (honesty, truthfulness), character and trust, and positive corporate identity between corporate organizations and their stakeholders. This content of shared values and principles, therefore, makes CRM necessary in the management of the reputation damaging issues affecting cooperative societies in Nigeria. It is pertinent to note that most of the contemporary challenges of cooperative societies in Nigeria are largely traceable to either outright failure or non-adherence of these organizations to these core values, which eventually manifest in corrupt practices, leadership tussles, mal-administration, etc. This paper argues that the application of CRM tools and strategies has the capacity that can drive measures to control and positively manage some of these reputation related issues that are jeopardizing the good performance and growth of cooperative societies in the country.

The paper posits that the absence of CRM tools are evident in the operations and management of many cooperative organizations in Nigeria, and this status quo may be aiding their inability to withstand the damaging effects of increasing poor public image and distrust which hampers growth and productivity. The paper ends with conclusion and a number of recommendations that aim to transform both the way that cooperatives deal with their public perception and the manner they run their operations in order to eschew issues that undermine their reputation and success.

The paper sets out with the interrogation of some conceptual and practical correlations between corporate reputation and cooperative organizations; and delves into contemporary reputation related challenges of cooperative societies in Nigeria before attempting to explore the implications of effective utilization of corporate reputation management (CRM) skills and strategies for the enhancement of the productivity and growth of cooperatives in Nigeria. The methodology employed includes library research and secondary sources of data from relevant and valuable materials related to the focus of the paper.

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN VALUES/PRINCIPLES OF CORPORATE REPUTATION AND COOPERATIVES IN NIGERIA

A cooperative is an enterprise formed and directed by an association of users, applying within itself the rules of democracy and directly to serve both its own intended members and the community as a whole (Aroh, 2002). This definition of a cooperative brings to bear its connection with the practice of corporate reputation because of its emphasis on service to the community as a whole. Corporate reputation reflects relationships with host community and other aspects of social responsibility, which go to define the public assessment and perception of an organization within its scope in terms of social milieu (Mahon, 2002).

In terms of correlation, the two concepts of corporate reputation and cooperative organization can be perceived from two main dimensions: people-centredness and common principles/values. They both deal with issues that concern or relate to the interest of people both within and outside organizations. They care a lot about the welfare, interests, expectations and targets of all stakeholders, partners and even the public at large. From the perspective of people-centredness, cooperative societies are basically organizations that are formed when people come together to achieve common objectives. They cooperate both formally and informally either temporarily or permanently in order to undertake some activities for common good. In cooperatives, membership is constitute of individuals who willingly come together so as to promote and sustain their own economic or social interest directly through the common cooperative establishment. Cooperative organizations are people-centered and this is further exemplified through certain elements that characterize them. They are organizations made up of voluntary association of members, and has the objective of promoting its members' social and economic welfare through mutual help and group financing as well as upholding democratic norms. All these characteristics portray cooperative societies as self-help, members-centered and democratic organizations and therefore, in the interest of their members welfare and public image care about their corporate reputation.

Similarly, corporate reputation is a concept and practice that is equally people-centred or people focused because of its primary concern with public attention, public assessment and public perception. Virtually every notion of corporate reputation anchors on its emphasis on public reflection of organizations' practices, products, character and overall performances. Corporate reputation centres on what people perceive, feel and think of an organization. Fombrun & Foss (2001) state that "corporate reputation is the overall perception which various stakeholders have about a business, product or service". Also, Nkwocha (2010), posits that corporate reputation can be defined as the totality of how internal and external publics or stakeholders see and perceive an organization based on various observations, impressions, knowledge, information and most importantly its products and services, performance in the market place, corporate identity, corporate communications and corporate governance over a period of time. These definitions highlight people-centredness of the concept and practice of corporate reputation..

Again, the dual practice of cooperative organization and corporate reputation are further correlated by their common or shared principles and values. Onuoha (2002) defines value as "a quality in a thing that makes it desirable in itself or more desirable than something else. It is a basic conviction about what is good or bad, right or wrong, important or trivial, good, better or best. Cooperative values are integral components of cooperative identity and organization. Anozie (2004) observes that, "the principles of cooperation spring from the values and are manifestations of the values. The values are rooted in the heart of committed cooperators and their leaders. These well-enunciated values of cooperative organizations include: Self-help, solidarity, equality, equity, economic democracy; others are honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others.

These values of cooperatives are similar to those of the practice of corporate reputation in terms of their nature and characteristics. The very essence of corporate reputation lies on the import of the basic elements of reputation in its literacy and practical implications. Reputation is the accumulation or aggregation of positive identity, values, character, qualities, attributes and goodwill overtime in the life of somebody, corporate organization or government. The elements of reputation include: integrity, character and trust. Integrity revolves around honesty, truthfulness, consistency and straight dealing with everyone or stakeholders. Integrity builds trust, which is the soul of every business and leadership success (Nkwocha, 2016). Character is the total reflection of an organization from inside as well as visible antecedents attributed

to its existence. These elements represent the core values of corporate reputation, and are the same with those of cooperative societies; as they emphasize on honesty (integrity), openness, equality, equity, solidarity and self-help (positive character and trust). In a nutshell, the shared values and principles (elements) of cooperatives and corporate reputation underscores their relatedness and the significance of employing corporate reputation management skills for the growth of cooperative organizations in Nigeria.

REPUTATION AND IMAGE RELATED CHALLENGES OF COOPERATIVE SOCIETIES IN NIGERIA

The progress of cooperative societies in Nigeria has been on a relatively positive trend over decades but not without existential threats and challenges. Most of these challenges are in form of impediments to proper management of cooperatives; and they include: inadequate numbers of cooperative/extensions staff; lack of/or inadequate training of staff; lack of infrastructural facilities; lack of basic understanding of cooperative principles and values; poor governments perception of cooperatives (Anozie, 2004). Despite these challenges, focus here is on the reputation-related challenges of cooperative societies in Nigeria in recent times, and they are as follows;

- a. Poor leadership
- b. Leadership tussles
- c. Official corruption
- d. Non-Adherence to Values/ Principles

These are some of the critical issues of cooperatives that affect their corporate reputation because of their impacts on peoples' opinion, public assessment and perception of cooperative organizations in Nigeria. There are rising issues of bad leaders (executives and officers), violent leadership tussles, official corruption and matters of mismanagement driven by some sort of value crisis. These affect public image and perception of cooperatives, and are enunciated below;

- (A) **POOR LEADERSHIP:** A good number of the problems that cooperative societies face in recent times in Nigeria emanate from poor leadership. It is known that cooperative societies and indeed the entire cooperative movement derive initiative and strength from their leadership and management style. Leaders of cooperative organizations must be persons whom other people (members) can rely on and trust. It is in cooperatives that the maxim: good leadership begets good followership really applies. However, the increasing issues of poor leadership often as a result of officials incompetence, inexperience and rascality has continued to impact negatively on the corporate reputation of cooperatives in Nigeria (Ugwuanyi, 2020). The prevalence of recurring issues of different forms of bad leadership or incompetent leadership creates bad news about cooperatives and dents their image and public perception; and calls for interventions for betterment of cooperative societies in the country.
- (B) **LEADERSHIP TUSSLES:** Closely related to the issue of poor leadership is the incessant cases of leadership tussles emanating from poorly organized elections, emergence of unpopular leaders, election irregularities and outright rigging as well as post-election crisis. Despite the involvement of government ministry (often the Ministry of Industries or Ministry of Trade and Commerce) in the conduct of elections in cooperative organizations, issues of elections not being credible, free and fair jeopardize the fundamental value of cooperatives that emphasize honesty and trust; and therefore antithetical to the growth of cooperatives. Worst of its impact is the stories that go out to the public of cooperatives as self-help organizations that are increasingly unable to elect acceptable and good leaders that can serve their common interests and objectives. These affect their corporate reputation adversely. Obi-duru (2019) opines that, "the rate at which many cooperative societies are dealing with problems of leadership before and after elections can be counterproductive".
- (C) **OFFICIAL CORRUPTION:** The act of corruption, according to many authors and researchers has been institutionalized in Nigeria. Official corruption perpetrated in the name, premises and privileges of cooperative organizations remain a growing challenge that is giving cooperatives bad reputation. Onwudiwe (2017), stresses that "corruption is viewed as the country's worst nightmare and the most dreadful challenge confronting the nation today". This endemic corruption has permeated all organizations, including cooperative societies that are naturally self-help and member-centred organizations that should eschew all acts of corruption for self-survival and growth.

Issues of executive officers taking gratification, bribes, percentages from contractors, and other sharp practices with financial institutions are becoming commonplace in some cooperatives in Nigeria (Okoroafor & Ezeibe, 2013). Nothing attracts shame, bad name and poor reputation as much as dishonesty and fraud; and the experience of this ugly phenomenon in some cooperative societies are giving these organizations very poor reputation that is undermining growth.

- (D) **NON-ADHERENCE TO VALUES/PRINCIPLES:** Firstly, values guide the direction of how organizations are run and organized towards set goals and objectives. The issue of value crisis in form of non-adherence to the established values of honesty, openness, equality, equity, economic democracy, etc., in the affairs and operations of many cooperatives continues to be a major challenge to their productivity and growth in Nigeria. Values and principles drive cohesion and solidarity among cooperators and keep them in view of their collective existence and interests, which are paramount in their agenda. Non-adherence to values exposes cooperatives to public ridicule and shame that dents corporate reputation. Secondly, lack of basic understanding of cooperative principles also contribute to poor reputation of cooperatives. Anozie (2004) argues that the field staff usually have less education and training than their counterparts in the offices. Many of the field staff do not understand the very concepts of cooperatives. Instead, they regard the societies as part or an extension of the government's arms. Therefore, they cannot envisage what the difference should be between the cooperatives societies and government departments or divisions.

EXPLORING CORPORATE REPUTATION MANAGEMENT TOOLS FOR GROWTH OF COOPERATIVES IN NIGERIA

Corporate Reputation Management (CRM) as a concept can be vaguely interpreted as managing the reputation or image of a corporate entity such as a company, a non-profit organization, and government, among others. It practically involves exercising control over or influencing public opinion and behaviour towards an entity. CRM, therefore involves effective and efficient planning, organizing, controlling, directing, leading, coordinating and allocating scarce human, financial and material resources to achieve an organization's reputational goals and objectives and eliminating its reputational risks (Nkwocha, 2016). CRM entails an all-embracing phenomenon of influencing and controlling the ideas, opinion and perception people form and have about an organization; in order to earn or attract public appreciation, goodwill, cooperation and support. Some of its critical components include research, effective communication (formal and informal), dynamic interaction and strategic information management.

The above descriptions of CRM explain clearly its relevance and importance for organizations, including cooperatives that are now increasingly experiencing reputational challenges and risks. This is even more critical considering the role cooperatives play in the economy of nations. In all countries, cooperative societies have helped and are still contributing in very significant ways to bring about socio-economic changes that improve the wellbeing and standard of living of members and the nation as a whole. Cooperative societies have made significant contributions and achievements in the socio-economic development of Nigerians and the nation in many areas including empowerment of members and families, provision of credit facilities, sensitization of members, agricultural production and marketing, transfer of innovations in agriculture, employment creation, and provision of educational facilities, mobilization of rural savings and control of inflation. As a result of these roles, cooperatives play in the economy, governments (national and sub-national) devote some huge and substantial resources to the development of cooperative organizations. But like many other organizations in Nigeria, cooperatives are not spared by the issues of official corruption, poor leadership, leadership tussles and value crisis that have strongly continued to mar efforts towards sustainable growth (Ejima, 2019).

It is at this juncture that the concept and practice of CRM becomes not only relevant but exigent for the survival and development of cooperatives in Nigeria. The various reputational challenges of these organizations continue to pose serious reputational risks that need proper management strategies for control or avoidance in the interest of self-sustenance and expansion. In Nigeria, as in the developed world, beginning from the 1990s to date, there has been a conscious effort in blue chip organizations to build, sustain, protect, project and maintain solid positive corporate reputation, which is now recognised as an invaluable corporate asset by many researchers (Mahon, 2002; Orukari, 2010). In fact, CRM is said to be

the most contemporary and highly sophisticated public relations practice requiring specialized skills and techniques (tools) to nurture and build good reputation and eliminate reputational risks in organizations, including cooperative organizations. The question at this point is in what ways or manners can CRM effectively help cooperatives in dealing with or managing the rising reputation related issues that are evidently undermining their growth and development in Nigeria? One way this can be achievable is in the area of values/principles reinforcement. The homogeneity of the values of cooperatives and those of corporate reputation brings to bear their and compatibility and mutual relevance in corporate affairs. They have shared values of integrity (honesty and truthfulness), openness and transparency (trust), equality, equity, democracy and member-centred (character) that have the potential to enhance organizational growth. Non-adherence to the core values of honesty, trust, economic democracy, equality and social justice has put to jeopardy the interest of cooperators and equally affected their reputation adversely. These values are eroded when leadership of cooperatives engage in corrupt practices, leadership tussles and other forms of misconducts that are against the very elements upon which cooperatives are formed. The incorporation of CRM skills and techniques will imply the reassessment of the factors that are making or contributing to some cooperatives' failure to adhere to their core values, which is fundamental to vision and mission coordination. Since CRM values and principles are like those of the cooperative societies, albeit extra tools attached to CRM strategy, their incorporation will act as significant reinforcement measure that can strengthen the adherence to the values and principles by the cooperative societies in the country. These values can be reinforced to enhance corporate reputation of cooperatives through emphasis and adaptation to what is called the top priorities of corporate reputation management, and they focus on stakeholders' engagement, corporate communication and lastly media relations.

The extent to which these priorities can influence and control the reinforcement of the value system of cooperatives cannot be overstated nor misplaced. They are areas of extensive impacts and ramifications that touch positively on public opinion and perception of any organization, more importantly self-help organizations such as cooperatives. All the reputation related issues and risks facing cooperative societies in Nigeria are apparently issues that are primarily borne out of failure of or non-adherence to established values and principles. Values define an organization's core sense of establishment, purpose and positive direction towards the future and therefore when they are derailed or violated by certain practices inactions, then the organization suffers. Therefore, in managing value crisis and many other challenges that undermine cooperatives' development, the stakeholders must be effectively engaged in all the programmes, plans and projects of the organizations. Stakeholders' engagement extends to deliberate efforts to constantly carry along members and other players collective interests, consensus opinions and physical commitment; and participation with resourceful cooperation and teamplay. On no account should members develop sense of lack of belonging or usefulness in the affairs of the organization. CRM spells out strategic and practical dimensions of stakeholders engagement that if adopted can reinforce some of the values of cooperatives that are hitherto weak or nonexistent, and help to forestall issues of negative corporate reputation that undermine growth (Ekekwe, 2003).

Perhaps, robust corporate communication has the capacity to revamp the failing value system of some cooperatives in Nigeria. Formal, adequate and timely dissemination of the required and apt information and data concerning how the affairs and operations of cooperative societies are run can go a long way to put things right among cooperators and their stakeholders, especially in this era of so much misinformation, disinformation and publicity menace that are common in social media. This particular priority of CRM emphasizes the role of proper communication management, which some cooperative organizations do not take very seriously, and as a result suffer poor reputation due to false propaganda and malicious claims against them. In some cases not responding timely and in a well-coordinated manner to issues, helps to build bad image and public perception over time. CRM and branding via robust corporate communication can synergize to achieve the best reputation for cooperatives in the country.

Furthermore, media relations are increasingly the priority of CRM that enhance organizational growth in an immeasurable dimension given its widespread attention and mobilization. Proactive and tactful media relations are so relevant in the contemporary drive for organizational expansion and productivity. Apart from the role, media relations can play in influencing and controlling the public opinion and perception of

cooperative societies through prompt and purposely publicity for cooperatives and their activities and businesses, media relations on its own also helps to activate stakeholders engagement through advertisements, announcements and other media programmes that create awareness and integration. It also plays outstanding role in having effective and robust corporate communication through organizing inter- corporation activities and partnerships that enhance productivity and facilitate growth of cooperative organizations. CRM tools and strategies, particularly the three top priorities of stakeholders' engagement, corporate communication and media relations are concrete areas of weakness in the operations of some cooperatives that worsen their ability to counter or manage the rising reputation related issues that are bedeviling them. Exploring and utilizing the efficacy of these priorities in the day – to – day activities and operations of cooperative societies will reinforce the failing value system, minimize their reputational challenges and provide the required leverages that positive corporate reputation offers in terms of productivity and growth of organizations in this contemporary economic world order. Cooperatives in Nigeria have got to leverage on the provisions and priorities of CRM to revamp their ailing public opinion and perception, having in focus that positive corporate reputation is earned or won through excellent or distinctive performance via high quality products and services, impactful programmes and policies, unique corporate values and culture; not mere sloganeering or propaganda (Nkwocha, 2016). The application of CRM tools remains the way forward for progressive cooperative societies in a highly challenged economy such as Nigeria.

Conclusion

The non-adherence to the established core values and principles of honesty and openness (integrity), equality, economic democracy, etc., that manifest in acts of dishonesty, corruption and poor leadership can be observed in recent developments in many cooperative societies in Nigeria. Cooperatives are increasingly experiencing corruption among executives, leadership tussles emanating from poorly conducted elections and unpopular leadership as well as other issues of mismanagement that undermine productivity and growth. However, the unique and thorough practice of corporate reputation management (CRM), which has shared value and principles with cooperative organizations, possesses the skills and strategies that can adequately transform and sustain the promotion of adherence to laid down values and principles that can effectively promote growth of organization, including cooperatives towards attaining set goals and objectives. Therefore, CRM techniques, particularly the three main priorities of stakeholders' engagement, corporate communication and media relations have been enunciated as specific areas cooperative societies must work on, alongside leveraging on the emphatic posture of CRM on value centredness to reinforce firm adherence to values and ethics that drive organizational vision and mission. These steps have been advocated as the way forward for the growth and sustainable development of cooperative organizations in Nigeria.

Recommendations

In pursuit of the transformation and growth of cooperative societies through the advanced tools of corporate reputation management in Nigeria, the following submissions have been put forward:

- ❖ There is urgent need for cooperative societies to organize workshops for their executives, particularly before assuming positions for better understanding of the role strict adherence to values and principles play in the pursuit and sustenance of organizational goals and objectives, which determines productivity and growth.
- ❖ Cooperative organizations should enshrine in their constitution, and in well spelt out letters, emphasis on upholding their core values and principles as the lifewire of organizational success and growth, and therefore must be observed and respected by all members, stakeholders and particularly the executive officers.

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