

# **PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE IMAGE OF STATE GOVERNMENT OWNED HOSPITALS IN AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Concern for the image of any organization is of great importance to the owners of such organization. Thus, this study sought to ascertain whether General Hospitals in Akwa Ibom State have positive or negative image and such other factors which form this type of perception among the various publics. Survey design was considered appropriate for this study. Six general hospitals were selected through stratified random sampling technique from the three senatorial districts of Akwa Ibom State. Out of these, 300 respondents were randomly selected and administered questionnaire, while frequencies and percentage were used for data analysis. Findings show that General Hospitals in Akwa Ibom State have negative image of which management is responsible. It was recommended that immediate employment of qualified Public Relations personnel be done and adequate Public Relations programmes launched in the various hospitals across Akwa Ibom State.*

**Keywords:** *Public perception, image, general hospitals, Akwa Ibom State*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The organized two-way communication between an organization and its various publics is important to the success of such organization. This is because the activities of the various publics impact either positively or negatively on the success or failure of such organization (Haywood, 1984). Jenkins (1993) believes that it is the Public Relations practitioner that can identify communication problems and provide affected solutions to such problems. Issues affecting relationships in an organization usually attract public relations activities in order to promote goodwill and better friendship but where such activities are not available nor experts to handle such matters, it creates distrust and often leads to dispute. In most hospitals, such is the case.

The background of this study revealed that no organization can succeed without adequate consideration of its publics. Therefore, the aim of this study is to find out the public's perception of the image of General Hospitals. It equally has a specific objective of finding out whether such perception results in positive or negative image and to determine the Public Relations strategy adopted by the hospitals to influence their image. The study concentrated on hospitals taken as representative sample of hospitals in Akwa Ibom State. This study is significant because it will allow management of these hospitals to know what people's perception about them is. Also, it will allow the managements of hospitals to appreciate the role and importance of Public Relations activities and the need to employ public relations

officers in their respective health institutions. The study sought to answer the following questions which resulted from the stated problems:

- i. What is the public's perception of general hospitals in Akwa Ibom State?
- ii. What is/are the cause(s) of this perception?
- iii. What effect does this perception have on the patronage of these hospitals?
- iv. What Public Relations strategies are adopted by the hospitals to influence the image?

### **ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN HOSPITAL MANAGEENT**

Public Relations generally is concerned with establishing and maintaining goodwill and mutual understanding between an organization and the public. In building Public Relations in hospitals, Wilcox, (1992) list out ten areas of primary concern to the Public Relations practitioner. These include reputation protection and enhancement; information service and community relations.

Smith and Harris (2005) believe that the role Public Relations pertaining to hospital reputation involves preserving and building goodwill by demonstrating to the public that the hospital is a quality health care centre, dependable service provider, staff-friendly and environmentally safe for users. These will result in what Williams (1990) says will protect the hospital against attacks, tell good stories when controversy arises, initiate programmes that will explain hospital goals and policies, show concern in times of disasters and epidemics and equally show that welfare packages of the hospital for its staff and the host community are adequately provided.

In building and maintaining goodwill amongst the various publics of the hospitals, Smith and Harris (2005) point out that good media relation is important. This can be achieved through news conferences, press releases, public service announcements, tours and community relations programmes. These will keep the public informed of services available in the hospitals, interpret hospital policies to the people and also clarify controversial matters. These will in turn help to stimulate interest and confidence in the hospital.

### **PERCEPTION AS A PUBLIC RELATIONS TOOL**

Hospitals' public relations will help change attitude, change perception and form good image by the people about the hospital. Holloran (1967) sees attitude as the predisposition of the individual to elevate some symbols or objects in a favourable or unfavourable manner. Scheff (1984) sees attitude as a "reflection of position" adopted by a person or a group. He concludes by saying that "attitude is the biggest single factor in influencing decision".

The image of an organization held by a particular public is a clear reflection of the attitude of the public to such an organization. This is so because image is a short term event and is easier to make the reputation which takes a longer gestation period. Image created by an organization is building block for reputation. Hence, Kotler (1985) stresses that an organization is interested in its image because

of the influence it has on behaviour and attitude of the public. Therefore, an organization seeking to remain in business must strive not to have any negative image. Klapper (1960) puts it that people tend to expose themselves to those mass communication messages which are in accord with their existing attitude. This, points to the selectivity exposure, perception and retention of message.

Perception, according to Berelson and Gary (1964), is a "process by which an individual selects, organizes and interprets information". This will make such an individual become aware of some changes due to the type of information available because "some kind of communication on some kind of issues to some kind of people creates some kind of effect". It is most important that an organization understands that perception is a vital tool in public relations problem solving. In view of this, Scheff (1967) stresses the need for harmony between perception of agreement and actual agreement as this will affect relationship.

### **PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURES**

The survey research design was adopted for this study. The population of the study consisted of only general hospitals operating within Akwa Ibom State. Data from Ministry of Health shows that a total of forty-three (43) hospitals and allied health institutions are operational in Akwa Ibom State. This number is made up of primary, secondary and tertiary health institutions. Of this number, six General Hospitals, representing the secondary health institutions were selected using stratified random sampling (two from each of the three Senatorial districts) to form the sample size. Ballot sampling was adopted so as to give all subjects equal opportunity of being selected. The instrument adopted for the study was questionnaire and observation. General Hospitals selected from each of the three senatorial districts of Akwa Ibom State for the study were:

#### ***Ikot Ekpene Senatorial District***

General Hospital, Ikono  
General Hospital, Ukpom Abak

#### ***Eket Senatorial District***

Immanuel General Hospital, Eket  
General Hospital, Urue Offong

#### ***Uyo Senatorial District***

General Hospital, Itu  
St. Theresa's Hospital, Use Abat

The selected Hospitals were visited and sampled. Copies of questionnaire were distributed to patients, staff and community members where the hospitals are located. Completed questionnaire forms were collected while some staff and patients were observed. In view of this, data collected for the study will be analyzed using the simple percentage. The study equally employs the Simple Opinion Measurement (SOM) which enables opinion such as "agree" as positive answer while "disagree" and "undecided" as negative answers.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The data analysis is based on 283 out of 300 questionnaire forms that were properly filled and returned. The study established that hospital Staff show unfriendly disposition and do not pay prompt attention to the needs of their patients. This results in the insensitivity of hospital management to the feelings of patients. Table 1 shows that 36.4% disagreed to the friendly disposition of the staff, 35.3% were in support while 28.3% were undecided. Table 3 equally supports the fact that hospitals' managements are insensitive to the feelings of the patients. The study also shows that corruption in the various hospitals is a direct influence of the larger society and therefore creates a negative image for the hospital. On table 4, 95.1% of the respondents agreed while only 4.9% respondents disagreed with the above fact.

The corrupt image of the larger society has therefore affected negatively the image of the hospital. Table 6 shows that 185 respondents (65.4%) agreed to this fact while 34.6% (98 respondents) disagreed. On the availability of qualified Public Relations practitioners and adequate Public Relations strategies adopted by the various hospitals, the findings clearly in table 8 reveal that the various hospitals do not have qualified Public Relations personnel and therefore adequate Public Relations machinery cannot be put in place to help boost the image of the hospitals. This goes to confirm that the place of Public Relations in an organization cannot be over emphasized as it will lead to creating an acceptable image both within and outside the organization.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Public relations as a broad based enlightenment programme is of great importance to an organization. This study therefore concludes that there is negative publics' perception about general hospitals in Akwa Ibom State in spite of the adequate funding provided by government and incentives given to staff. It is therefore believed that this negative perception results from the corrupt tendencies of the larger society which in turn affects patronage of these hospitals. In this case, adequate measures must be taken to address the communication need of the various publics within and outside any organization.

In view of this, the following recommendations are given in order to improve the health care delivery system of the various hospitals in the state; hospital management's insensitivity to the feelings of patients should be avoided completely; Managements of the various hospitals should develop programmes that will keep the public informed of its activities and available services; such programmes will help promote good relationship. Professional Public Relations Practitioners should be employed in the various hospitals to perform Public Relations duties. Health workers should have attitudinal change in order to enhance trust within the health care system. Adequate policy and enlightenment will help change the negative image and reputation of hospitals in the state in order to justify government policy of free and affordable health services, at least to certain categories of individuals in the state.

**Table 1:** Respondents' Agreement on the Disposition of Hospital workers with particular reference to friendliness, prompt medical attention and respect for patients.

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Agreed	100	35.3
Disagreed	103	36.4
Undecided	80	28.3
Total	283	100

*Source:* Field survey 2010

**Table 2:** Affordability of Health Care Services in the Hospitals.

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Agreed	283	100
Disagreed	-	-
Undecided	-	-
Total	283	100

*Source:* Field survey 2010

**Table 3:** Sensitivity of Hospital's Management to the feelings of Patients.

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Agreed	92	32.5
Disagreed	116	41
Undecided	75	26.5
Total	283	100

*Source:* Field survey 2010

**Table 4:** Hospitals Image is a reflection of corruption in the larger society.

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Agreed	269	95.1
Disagreed	14	4.9
Undecided	-	-
Total	283	100

*Source:* Field survey 2010

**Table 5:** Attitude of hospital staff enhances relationship or betrays trust between the hospital and its publics.

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Agreed	198	70
Disagreed	75	26.5
Undecided	10	3.5
Total	283	100

*Source:* Field survey 2010

**Table 6:** Effects of Hospital Image on Patronage

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Agreed	185	65.4
Disagreed	98	34.6
Undecided	-	-
Total	283	100

*Source:* Field survey 2010

**Table 7:** Adequate Public Relations practitioner and strategy adopted by the Hospital.

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Agreed	34	12
Disagreed	201	71
Undecided	48	17
Total	283	100

Source: Field survey 2010

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