



EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS ON THE REPUTATION OF
DIRECT SELLING COMPANIES. A CASE STUDY OF QNET LTD

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DECLARATION


DECLARATION BY STUDENT – PROJECT DISSERTATION

I hereby declare that this research is a result of my own original research and that, no part of it has been presented for another degree in this university or any other higher education institute. I further declare that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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DECLARATION BY SUPERVISOR

This Dissertation has been prepared and presented under my supervision according to the guidelines for supervision and formatting of Dissertation laid down by the University of Media, Arts and Communications.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the influence of public relations (PR) on the reputation of direct selling companies, with QNET Ltd. as the case study. Direct selling companies constantly face misconceptions and scrutiny globally and this has affected their reputation negatively.

Public relations play an important role in shaping the reputation of organisations by promoting transparency, trust, and building a positive public perception. This research employs qualitative data collection techniques, through interviews, to examine how PR strategies employed by QNET mitigate negative perceptions and enhance its reputation.

The findings from this study reveals the importance of strategic PR initiatives such as crisis communication, intensive campaigns, stakeholder engagements and digital media strategies in influencing public opinion and addressing challenges unique to the direct selling industry.

The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on reputation management, providing insights for public relations practitioners and policymakers on the effective use of PR in the direct selling sector.

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TABLE OF CONTENT

ITEM	PAGE NO.
DECLARATION.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.....	iv
Table of Content.....	v
CHAPTER ONE – OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY	
1.1 Background of the study.....	1
1.2 Statement of the problem	3
1.3 Research Objectives	3
1.4 Research questions.....	4
1.5 Scope of the study	4
1.6 Significance of the study.....	5
1.7 Organisation of the study.....	5
1.8 Chapter summary.....	7
CHAPTER TWO - LITERATURE REVIEW	
2.1 Introduction.....	8
2.2 Review of relevant literature.....	8
2.2.1 Role of public relation in reputation management.....	8
2.2.2 Public relations and crisis management.....	11
2.2.3 The direct selling and e-commerce industry.....	14
2.3 Theoretical framework.....	15
2.3.1 Relevance of the study.....	18
2.4 Profile.....	19
2.5 Operational definition of terms.....	20
2.6 Chapter summary.....	21
CHAPTER THREE - METHODOLOGY	
3.1 Introduction.....	22
3.2 Research approach.....	22
3.3 Research design.....	22
3.4 Research method.....	23
3.5 Population.....	23

3.6 Sampling technique.....	23
3.7 Data collection method.....	24
3.7.1 Secondary data.....	24
3.7.2 Primary data.....	24
3.8 Data analysis.....	25
3.9 Ethical considerations.....	25
3.10 Summary.....	25
CHAPTER FOUR – DATA ANALYSIS, PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AN DISCUSSIONS	
4.1 Introduction.....	26
4.2 Public relations strategy.....	26
4.3 Public perception and reputation.....	28
4.4 Challenges in PR practice in Ghana.....	29
4.5 Stakeholder engagement.....	31
4.6 Measuring the effects of PR strategies.....	33
4.7 Recommendations	34
4.8 Discussion of findings	35
4.9 Chapter summary	38
CHAPTER FIVE – SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	
5.1 Introduction	39
5.2 Summary of findings	39
5.3 Conclusion.....	42
5.4 Recommendations.....	42
5.5 Areas for future research.....	44
5.6 Limitation of the study.....	44
REFERENCES.....	45
APPENDIX A.....	52
APPENDIX B.....	55
APPENDIX C.....	70

CHAPTER ONE

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

1.1 Background of the study

In the evolving world of business and e-commerce, companies are paying attention to their reputation and brand image because like the famous actor and social commentator Will Rogers said, 'It takes a lifetime to build a good reputation, but you can lose it in a minute'. Public relations play a vital role in maintaining that good reputation and the direct selling industry where credibility and trust are important is not left out.

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) explains Public Relations (PR) as a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics. The PRSA posits that Public Relations encourages influencing, engaging, and building a relationship with key stakeholders across numerous platforms. This is believed to be a core responsibility that shapes and frames the public perception of an organization. ("About public relations," 2024.) Public Relations today is more than just press releases and working with the media but an evolving field that combines the use and application of data, stories, marketing, advertising, social and digital components. This fosters and sustains mutually beneficial relationships across audiences and channels (Freberg, 2020). Aljanabi (2020) posits that public relations practitioners are expected to explain the problems of the organisation identified through research to the public before they develop into crises. Public relations practitioners must comply with the ethics regarding their work because its success and reputation are linked to its morals, integrity, credibility, and the confidence of others in it and that of their organisation.

Corporate reputation is seen as the overall perception of stakeholders towards their organization or company, which is either positive or negative and the collective judgement of a company

based on ongoing assessments of its financial, social, and environmental impacts. (Mohd et al, 2023). The reputation of an organisation plays an important role in the progress or failure of any organisation and any stakeholder of that organisation can cause damage to the corporate reputation of that organisation. Hence the misconduct of stakeholders can tarnish the hard-won reputation of any multinational corporation overnight. (Chun et al., 2019). The reputation of an organisation also has an impact and influence on the confidence of investors, recruitment of staff, attitudes of suppliers and is used as a tool for business relations hence poses as a major risk on businesses. Companies engaged in retail, social media, and the internet, risk the spread of bad news faster than businesses in other areas. All stakeholders view the reputation of their organisations differently. For investors, it's the company performance, for employees, remuneration standards, suppliers are more interested in the payment ability of the organisation and with customers, it is the quality of the product or service. This emphasises the need for different strategies when dealing with reputation crisis from different stakeholders (Edi & Wati, 2022).

Direct selling has existed for decades and is a type of non-store retailing where all direct sellers are non-salaried, and the traditional notion of direct selling is of an industry that is face-to-face and people orientated where relationships are formed (Wait, 2019). According to the Direct Selling Association, direct selling is a retail channel used by top global brands and smaller, entrepreneurial companies to market products and services to consumers. Most of these companies market all types of goods and services, including jewellery, cookware, nutritional's, cosmetics, housewares, energy, insurance, and other products. The direct selling association also reveals that direct selling is an avenue where entrepreneurial persons work independently to build a business with low start up and overhead cost. ("What is direct selling," 2024). Emphasis is placed on the word independently. Statistics from the World Federation of Direct Selling Associations 2022 global annual direct selling statistical data report reveals that Africa

/ Middle east recorded an estimated retail sales of \$1466 million in 2022 which shows a decline of 13.3% in sales when compared to previous years. ("Wfdsa stats," 2023.)

This study will explore the influence public relations has on the reputation of a direct selling company with QNET Ltd as the case study.

1.2 Statement of the problem

While there has been some research done on the influence of public relations on brand reputation, most studies have not focused on the direct selling industry. Anani-Bossman, (2020) in his research on the role of public relations in corporate reputation management focused on other industries in Ghana like the banking, food and beverage and oil and gas. However, there is limited to no research conducted on the influence of public relations in the direct selling industry. This gap is significant because, it affects both industry and academia.

This research aims to address this gap by conducting qualitative research through purposive interviews and document analysis in addressing the lack of empirical evidence on the effectiveness of PR strategies employed by direct selling companies like QNET Ltd in managing their reputation in Ghana and how these strategies impact their stakeholders.

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To examine the strategies used by QNET LTD's Public Relations team in Ghana.
2. To assess the impact of QNET LTD's Public Relations strategies on the company's reputation.
3. To identify the main stakeholders of QNET LTD in Ghana

4. To identify the issues faced by QNET's Public Relations team in maintaining a positive reputation in Ghana.
5. To suggest recommendations for improving the Public Relations practices of direct selling companies in Ghana.

1.4. Research Questions

1. What Public relations strategies does QNET Ltd employ in Ghana?
2. How does the public view the reputation of QNET Ltd in Ghana?
3. What challenges does the QNET Ltd PR team face in maintaining a positive image in Ghana?
4. Who are the company's main stakeholders?
5. How effective are QNET Ltd.'s PR strategies in enhancing its reputation among its Ghanaian publics?

1.5 Scope of the study

This study will focus on examining the various public relations strategies that QNET Ltd uses in Ghana. It will also study any significant shifts in QNET Ltd.'s PR strategies in the past few years and the impact it has on the company's reputation. The study will focus on Ghana, and on how the public relations strategies influence direct selling companies with QNET Ltd as the case study. This research will further identify the challenges faced by QNET's PR team in maintaining a positive image and explore how these challenges are addressed.

The research will identify the key stakeholders of QNET Ltd in Ghana, including customers, employees, regulators, and the media, to understand their influence on the company's reputation and the role PR plays in managing relationships with these stakeholders.

The study will employ qualitative research methods, including purposive interviews with QNET's PR professionals and stakeholders, as well as document analysis, to gather insights into the effectiveness of the PR strategies used by QNET Ltd. The study aims to provide recommendations for improving the public relations practices of direct selling companies in Ghana, based on the findings related to QNET Ltd.'s PR strategies and their impact on the company's reputation.

1.6 Significance of the study

This research will provide QNET Ltd and other direct selling companies with information on how to strategize and use public relations in the Ghanaian space. It will contribute to both academia and industry by bridging the literature gap in public relations, corporate reputation, and direct selling in Ghana. It will also contribute to understanding the Ghanaian landscape when it comes to direct selling and inform direct selling companies on the key challenges and opportunities in PR for direct selling companies when penetrating the Ghanaian market.

1.7 Organisation of the study

This study will explore the influence of public relations on the brand reputation of direct selling companies, specially focusing on QNET Ltd. as a case study. The research will help understand how public relations strategies are employed by QNET Ltd in maintaining its brand reputation in the face of public scrutiny and misconceptions often associated with the direct selling industry. The study will be in six chapters and each chapter will address a specific aspect of the research in achieving the overall objective.

Chapter one provides an overview of the entire study and explains the main objectives of the study, the problems identified, the questions that the research seeks to answer and the scope of the entire study. It further explains the significance of the study introducing the research problem, objectives, and research questions. It also discusses the significance of the study and give a clear overview on how the entire research would be structured.

Chapter two will review existing literature pertaining to public relations, brand reputation and the direct selling industry. This chapter will explore theories and frameworks that important to understanding public relations and its influence on brand reputation. In this chapter, the gaps in literature in the field of study will be clearly identified especially in the direct selling industry

In chapter three the research methodology employed will be stated. This chapter will explain why that methodology was chosen and it will further explain the data collection methods, sampling techniques, ethical considerations and the data analysis process.

In Chapter four the research findings would be presented and would explain how QNET Ltd. uses public relations strategies to manage and enhance its brand reputation. Findings will be organised in key themes identified in this chapter. The key findings and its implications in relation to the research questions raised in Chapter one will be discussed. The effectiveness of QNET's public relations strategies and their impact on the company's brand reputation would be analysed using the findings. The chapter will also reveal how the findings will contribute to understanding how reputation is management in the direct selling industry.

Chapter five will be the final chapter and will summarise the key finding and based on the findings and offer a conclusion. The limitations of the study will be disclosed and recommendations on how QNET Ltd and other direct selling companies can improve their public relations practices to enable them do away with the misconceptions and further improve their brand reputation would be stated.

1.8 Chapter summary

This chapter gives a broad overview on what the entire research is going to be about and introduces the entire research. This chapter reveals the lack of research available in the sphere of direct selling when it comes to public relations and identifying what public relations strategies are employed by QNET Ltd and their effectiveness forms the problem identified and objective of the study. The research will further probe into the relevant stakeholders of the company and which public relations strategy is used in working with them. This study in the end will be beneficial to both academia and the direct selling industry. The chapter further explains the framework in which the research would be conducted, while providing the necessary context to understanding the importance of exploring the influence that public relations has on the brand reputation of direct selling companies.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses and reviews literature that is relevant to the topic and review other related studies. It also throws light on the theoretical framework that is used in this study and as well as defines the terms and concepts in the study. The chapter concludes with a chapter summary.

2.2 Review of Relevant Literature

2.2.1 Role of Public Relations in Reputation Management

To better understand the basis of this research, it is important to first understand public relations and how much it has evolved over the years. According to Grunig & Kim (2021), in the early days, public relations was merely a press agency role, where public relations officers were reduced to press relations officers and were only interested in getting favourable press mentions for their organisations, no matter what it took. During this era, the practitioners engaged in one-way communication, which was from the organization to the public without room for transparency or feedback. They dwelled on the lack of probity to hide relevant public information and told only the favourable stories of their organizations to their public. Public Relations was generally described as a tool for subterfuge, insincere public gestures, spinning, and a mere propaganda machinery within this era

(Olariu, 2017) later redefines Public Relations as a tool that is used in creating public awareness, generating the public's preference for a product, repositioning a product in the market and sustaining the products in the market. In this context, PR plays a vital role in promotion and communication.

(Umaru et al., 2022) also emphasized public relations as a management function that is used by both the private and public sectors because it plays an important role in fostering and maintaining a positive relationship between an organisation and its publics, both internal and external. They argue that an organisations success is influenced by how cordial the relationship with its immediate community is, because this helps build and foster trust and in the end influences productivity and their overall performance.

(Olariu 2017) further highlights key public relations tools which he states are publications, events, news releases, speeches, public service activities, written and audiovisual materials, corporate identity building, and telephone services. He also noted that planning public relations activities today involves setting clear objectives, selecting the right messages and communication channels, and assessing the outcomes of these.

Anani-Bossman (2020) emphasises this point. He posits that PR is at the forefront of spearheading the reputation management agenda employing several techniques such as determining the right communication tools, developing media plans, selecting the right messages, setting objectives, budgeting and determining the overall effectiveness of the PR strategy has become an essential business function that influences business decisions including how organisations plan and communicate with their key stakeholders.

It is clear that every organization needs a communications practitioner who is creative and proactive in establishing good relations and disseminating information to the public. This is done to minimize errors in conveying messages and misunderstandings in acceptance by the public. So that the image of an organization is always well maintained. For example, agency or institution A is experiencing a period of crisis and the image of the institution is viewed negatively by the public, Public Relations is the first party who will find the best solution and solution to solve the problems being faced (Raya & Apriliani, 2024).

McKie & Sriramesh (2017) argue that Public Relations (PR) is a field that focuses on managing communication and relationships between people, groups, and organizations with the aim of building, maintaining, or even repairing reputations. They state that PR plays a key role in crisis management, risk communication, and handling public issues. They further informed that people from various sectors, including business leaders, governments, and non-profits, use PR and overtime it has evolved from being about controlling messages to fostering mutually beneficial relationships, especially with the rise of social media and digital technologies.

(McKie & Sriramesh, 2017) further explains that in modern times, PR is less about controlling communication and more about building connections that benefit both organizations and the public.

Ntsugah & Bossman (2023) emphasize that PR remains at the forefront of spearheading the reputation management agenda by employing several techniques such as determining the right communication tools, developing media plans, selecting the right messages, setting objectives, budgeting, and determining the overall effectiveness of the PR strategy reputation has become an essential business function that influences business decisions including how organizations plan and communicate with their key stakeholders.

In their study, PR practitioners from selected multinational organizations were used as respondents to the research. Results indicate that public relations play a critical role in building the reputation of an organization. Practitioners use several activities including interpersonal communication, corporate social responsibility, and community engagement to build reputation.

Every organization certainly needs a practitioner in the field of communication who is creative and proactive in establishing good relations and disseminating information to the public. This is done to reduce errors in conveying messages and misunderstandings in acceptance by the public and to maintain a good image for the organization. For example, if an organization is

experiencing a period of crisis and their image is seen as negative by the public, the Public Relations unit is the first party that will find the best solution to solve the problems being faced. Public Relations include the strategic management of information exchange between a person or organization and the public, intending to shape public opinion. Studies have shown that public relations have a beneficial effect on audience engagement by effectively sharing information between different parties, leading to a more involved audience.

This shows that public relations has evolved over the years from being one sided and now involves building relationships with stakeholders.

In summary, PR has evolved from being a one-sided way of communicating to a strategic process that highlights relationship-building with stakeholders. Studies show that effective PR practices can enhance audience engagement and foster deeper involvement between organizations and their publics.

2.2.2 Public Relations and Crisis Management

One of the roles of public relations is crisis management. Oyewole (2023) posits that crises management is a critical organisational function which is one of the core essences of public relations. He refers to public relations as a strategic, marketing function that has been touted as an essential tool for resolving and or managing crises. He emphasises on the fact that crises management remains a critical organisational function and reveals how some crises have brought organisations to an abrupt end whiles leaving the reputation of other organisations crucially dented and as such, wanes the interest of stakeholders.

Bundy et al. (2017) defines an organizational crisis as an event perceived by managers and stakeholders as highly salient, unexpected, and potentially disruptive which can threaten an organization's goals and have profound implications for its relationships with stakeholders. In this article, (Bundy et al. 2017) outline four primary characteristics of crises and these are (a)

crises are sources of uncertainty, disruption, and change. (b) Crises are harmful or threatening for organizations and their stakeholders, many of whom may have conflicting needs and demands. (c) Crises are behavioural phenomena, meaning that the literature has recognized that crises are socially constructed by the actors involved rather than a function of the depersonalized factors of an objective environment. Lastly (d) crises are parts of larger processes, rather than discrete events. From their review of Literature, (Bundy et al. 2017) identified two primary perspectives that focused on different aspects of crises and crisis management. These which they stated were the internal and external perspectives.

The internal perspective, as explained by (Bundy et al. 2017) focuses on the within-organization dynamics of managing risk, its complexities, and technology. This means that organisations should be able to handle the technical aspect and the relational aspect of their organisations. They should be able to prevent crisis, reduce the impact of these crisis in case it happens and learn and improve from crises.

The external perspective according to (Bundy et al. 2017) focuses on the interactions of organizations and its external stakeholders. This perspective, believes that crisis management involves shaping perceptions and coordinating with stakeholders to prevent, solve, and grow from a crisis. Stakeholders are more involved here.

Bundy et al. (2017) believed that these two perceptions have been developed independently over the years and its integration would serve a better purpose. They situate it around three primary stages which they labelled a) Precrisis prevention, b) crisis management and c) Postcrisis outcomes and this involved both the internal and external perspectives.

Karam (2017) carried out a study on the impact of strategic planning on the crisis management of 5-star hotels. The study investigates crisis management styles (escaping, confrontation, cooperation, and containment) and their relationship to strategic planning processes. The study used a descriptive-analytical method with qualitative and quantitative approaches. Self-

administered e-mail questionnaires totalling 190 were sent to all the general managers at the Egyptian five-star hotels. The outcome revealed that there is a statistically significant correlation and the relationship between strategic planning processes and crisis management styles. There was a negative correlation between strategic planning and escape, while strategic planning and confrontation, cooperation, and containment have a positive correlation. The findings implied the significance of strategic planning in times of crisis to improve hotels' ability to survive and thrive in a crisis. The manager who actively exercises strategic planning is less escapable and able to manage the crisis either by using the style of cooperation, confrontation, or containment. The researcher recommended that hotels should employ a strategic approach to crisis management by embodying crisis management planning in the strategy process. Hotels should introduce crisis management as an integral and integrated part of strategic planning. Proper strategy and crisis management at the same time help hotels to think and plan strategically during a crisis and increase their ability to successfully manage it. (Nordeman & Humanson (2017) in their study of proactive crisis management affirmed that due to a competitive and consistently changing global business environment, it is almost impossible for organizations to avoid crises of various types and magnitude. The objective of their study was to display relationships between the perception of crisis awareness, crisis readiness, and the organizations' actual crisis management initiatives against major industrial crises. And also, to clarify if the perception of crisis awareness and crisis readiness could be affected by other factors that should be in consideration, which in turn could affect the outcomes of crisis-management initiatives and actions in industrial organizations. Data was obtained through literature and articles and was presented in the theory part. Collected data and empirical findings of the two largest automakers namely, Volkswagen and Toyota, who have been involved in scandals and crises related to core research of this paper. The findings of the research indicate that the perception of crisis awareness and crisis readiness in an organization

has a direct impact on the organization's crisis management initiatives and activities. Likewise, there are elements like Corporate Culture, Personnel Education in Crisis Management and Corporate Communication, and other factors, which would affect the perceptions of organizations. The study proposed that by the effective use of the elements listed above, organizations could influence employees' crisis awareness and crisis readiness positively, thus strengthening the organizations' crisis management capacities.

These studies demonstrate that strategic planning, crisis awareness, and readiness are important aspects of effective crisis management. Organizations that take a proactive approach in engage in these activities are better prepared to prevent, manage, and recover from crises, while maintaining their relationships with stakeholders and protecting their reputations.

2.2.3 The direct selling and e-commerce industry

Viswanathan (2018) describes direct selling by explaining that the direct selling business is a form of business in which products and services are marketed directly to consumers. The products are directly sold to the consumer in a non-retail environment and the sale occur generally at a customer's location like home, work, or other location. It eliminates the use of middlemen involved in product distribution, such as the brokers, regional distribution centres and wholesaler. Instead, products go from manufacturer to the consumer directly through a distributor or retailer who can also be a customer for those goods or services.

According to (Bobâlcă, C. 2015), Direct selling is a type of relationship marketing that facilitates the construction of a customized relation between the company and its clients and assures a long-term collaboration between the two parts. For a direct selling company, direct marketing is a powerful tool used to build strong relationships with the clients.

Viswanathan (2018) further explains that growth in the direct selling business is seen through companies having their own performance-based marketing and rewards plan based on the sale

of goods and services it offers. The higher the turnover, the higher the reward earned. According to (Viswanathan, 2018) companies provides product and services information in the form of brochure, leaflets, catalogues, Audio and video Visuals and the training programmes offered through internet and online training libraries or in person through the company trainers. The sales can be carried out individually or with the help of sales team formed by the individual.

But in Ghana recently, there have been several controversial issues surrounding direct selling companies. Seow (2022) posits that it is not easy to differentiate pyramid or Ponzi scheme from legitimate direct selling because unfortunately, due to a lack of regulatory scrutiny and public awareness, pyramid or Ponzi schemes have penetrated many countries around the world. According to (Seow, 2022) fraudulent operators disguise themselves as legitimate direct selling operators and infiltrate society causing catastrophic damage to the reputation of direct selling. He differentiates that Pyramid and Ponzi schemes are recruitment-centric and members are rewarded by mere recruitment, but the direct selling model is product-centric and thus, distributors are rewarded based on the personal and team sales of products.

2.3 Theoretical framework

Thomas (2017) explains theory as a description of a phenomenon and the interactions of its variables that are used to attempt to explain or predict. Generally, research is underpinned by some theoretical constructs. This helps draw research findings and analysis within certain theoretical frameworks and goes a long way to help appreciate these theories some more. It also helps the researcher confirm the existence of a theory in a phenomenon, challenge the existence of the said theory or even show some extensions or variations that may exist in the theory.

The theory that underpins this study is the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) which was propounded by W. Timothy Coombs which is grounded in the attribution theory that

explains how individuals interpret events and how this relates to their thinking and behaviour. Attribution theory suggests that people attribute responsibility for events, including crises, and their perceptions of that responsibility shape their reactions.

SCCT categorises crisis into different types. These include A) Victim crisis this is where the organisation is seen as a victim to the crisis. This is normally stemmed from natural disasters, the tampering of products etc. B) Accidental crisis where the organisation is involved in event or crisis that was unintentional. This is normally seen when there is a technical error or a machine or equipment malfunctions and the last is C) Preventable crisis. This is where the crisis could have been avoided or was intentional. The organisation is held responsible, and the reputation of the organisation is highly at risk here. This can be stemmed from mismanagement, illegal activities, or unethical behaviour.

Timothy Coombs (2007) further outlined some specific strategies that organisations can use in response to crisis depending on the type of crisis and the degree of responsibility attributed. His suggested strategies fall into three categories: the deny, diminish and rebuild strategies.

The deny strategies is where the organisations deny responsibility for the crisis, and this is used mostly in victim crisis situations. The organisation uses these strategies to distance itself from the crisis situation by using scapegoating, attacking the accuser etc.

The diminish strategy is where the organisation is where the organisation tries to reduce the severity or impact of the crisis or event or its responsibility to it by offering explanations and justifying the situation. These strategies are normally used in accidental crisis where the organisation takes some responsibility for the event but downplays its severity.

The rebuild strategies according to Coombs is when the organization accepts responsibility for the crisis and seeks to repair its reputation by apologising, offering compensation and even

performing some corrective actions. This is important in preventable crisis where the organisation must demonstrate its commitment to changing.

Timothy Coombs suggested some additional strategies that may be used alongside the main strategies mentioned above and this he called the Bolstering strategies. In this case organisations are recommended to use reminders; this is where the organisation reminds its stakeholders of its past good deeds in order to balance the current situation. He listed ingratiation as another strategy and in this case, organisations praise their stakeholders in order to get into their good books or win their favour. The last he states as victimage; this is where the organisation highlights the impact the crisis has had on them and the harm it has caused. This is also normally used in victim crisis.

Many scholars have agreed to this theory and even built on it, but others share a different opinion on the crisis response strategy

According to Coombs & Holladay (2014) the crisis response strategy research reflects a very specific univocal bias by concentrating on what organizational managers say and do to manage meaning. The “one voice” of the organization-as-crisis-manager is examined. This does not mean that all crisis responses emanate from a single spokesperson but rather that spokespersons, one or many, are perceived to be speaking for “the organization.” However, we must acknowledge that other voices may emerge during a crisis and seek to influence the meanings people attach to the crisis and the organization in crisis. The growth of social media has provided public places for other voices, in addition to the organization’s voice, to communicate about the crisis and crisis-related message. This argues that categorizing crisis into clear-cut types (victim, accidental, preventable) does not fully capture the complexity of real-life situations. This argues that crises are often fluid and more complex and may not fit neatly into these categories. As a result, SCCT may not provide sufficient flexibility for organizations facing confusing or evolving crises

Lu & Huang (2018) argue that crisis communication strategies like SCCT does not clearly consider the role of emotions in crisis communications. They argue that scholars tend to ignore the possibility that emotion plays as strong a role as rationality in cognition and argue that the neglect of an emotion-to-cognition approach is partly due to theoretical presuppositions and partly due to the difficulty of observing, targeting, controlling, and measuring crisis emotions.

Coombs (2007) states that SCCT is an example of the scientific social study of crisis communications. He emphasises that the internet is becoming a valuable tool for collecting information about warning signs and crisis as well as an option for communicating with stakeholders during a crisis. He mentions that this has also increased the crisis risks organisations face through computer hacking, denial of service and amplifying challenges from stakeholders that management might be operating an organisation in an inappropriate manner.

2.3.1 Relevance of the theory to the study

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) highlights the importance of aligning a crisis response strategy with the organisations level of responsibility towards the crisis. This helps the organisation protect and or potentially repair its reputation. A direct selling company like QNET Ltd faces crisis in Ghana a lot where they are accused of unethical practices. This theory would help determine if their public relations team uses the SCCT during crisis and if this theory actually work in complex situations like that of QNET Ltd.

2.4 Profile

ABOUT QNET LTD

Overview

QNET LTD is a global e-commerce-based direct selling company that operates in over 100 countries with regional offices and agency partnerships across the world. The company offers a wide range of products in different categories, which includes health and wellness, lifestyle, travel and education. The company operates under the umbrella of the QI Group, which was founded in 1998 by Vijay Eswaran and Joseph Bismark. QNET's business model is based on multi-level marketing (MLM), where independent representatives (IRs) promote and sell the company's products while also recruiting new representatives.

QNET uses a multi-level marketing model as its business model. This allows independent representatives earn commissions based on the sales of their recruits in addition to their own sales. This business model is known for its entrepreneurial opportunities but criticized for its resemblance to pyramid schemes.

QNET LTD's Product Range

QNET's product portfolio is diverse, encompassing several categories:

- **Health and Wellness:** Nutritional supplements, water purification systems, and personal care products.
- **Lifestyle:** Home care products, jewellery, watches, and fashion accessories.
- **Education:** Online learning courses and educational tools.
- **Travel:** Holiday packages and vacation club memberships.

("About QNET QNET - About QNet - Who are we? What we stand for...", 2023)

2.5 Operational definition of terms and concepts

Public Relations

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) defines public relations as a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.

Media relations

(McKie & Sriramesh, 2017) posit that in many parts of the world, many managers and public relations practitioners equate public relations with media relations. This they state is because typically, most practitioners spend most of their time developing relationships with members of the media with the goal of getting positive publicity.

Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is described as how a company manages its industry and takes responsibility for its social impact. Corporate social responsibility encompasses various characteristics like economic dependence, legal conformity, ethical requirement, and societal influences (Chen et al., 2021).

Stakeholder Engagement

According to (Kujala et al., 2022) stakeholder engagement is explained as the relationships between organizations and stakeholders, such as employees, customers, suppliers, competitors, local communities and citizens, and the various outcomes of these relations. Stakeholders are individuals, groups, or organizations that affect or are affected directly or indirectly by the activities of an organisation Kujala et al (2022).

2.6 Chapter summary

Chapter 2 of this research provides a comprehensive review of literature relevant to the role of public relations in managing the reputation of direct selling companies. It delves into the core functions of public relations in crisis management, highlighting theories like the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) by Coombs, which categorizes crises and offers tailored response strategies. The chapter also examines the direct selling industry, discussing its unique marketing model and the reputational challenges posed by fraudulent schemes. Additionally, critiques of SCCT, particularly regarding its limitations in addressing complex crises and the role of emotions, are explored. This review establishes a theoretical foundation for understanding how direct selling companies like QNET Ltd. manage reputation through strategic public relations efforts.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the methodology that this research utilised in acquiring the best research results. It outlines the methods used in exploring the influence of public relations on the brand reputation of direct selling companies in Ghana, with QNET Ltd as the case study. It details what research approach, design and sampling methods were used and what data collection method brought out the best results. The data analysis method was discussed, and ethics were considered in this chapter.

3.2 Research Approach

The qualitative approach was used for this study because it focuses on understanding human experiences and social phenomena. (Taherdoost, 2022) states that the qualitative research approach aims to solve scientific and practical problems in society by using naturalistic and interpretative methods and this aligns with the study's objectives. Through the use of a semi-structured interview guide, in-depth data was gathered which helped to understand the strategies and challenges faced by the PR team at QNET Ltd.

3.3 Research Design

A qualitative case study design was used for this research. This helps explore a phenomenon in a specific context using various data sources and perspectives to reveal different aspects of it

(Rashid et al., 2019). The case study design is used in this qualitative research to gain an in-depth understanding of how public relations activities influence QNET's brand reputation.

3.4 Research Method

Research methods are the means or modes of data collection or, sometimes, how a specific result is to be calculated (Igwenagu, 2016). A semi-structured interview was conducted for this study due to its appropriateness in gathering information from a specific group of people. Interviews with key public relations personnel from the Sub-Saharan Africa region of QNET Ltd were interviewed during the data collection process. This helped to gather rich and in-depth insights into the organisation under investigation. The qualitative approach helps understand people's experiences, views, and strategies in the organization's PR framework.

3.5 Population

According to (Majid, 2018), the population is the study's target population that it intends to study or treat. Population is a set of all the units which possess variable characteristic under study and for which findings of research can be generalised (Shukla, 2020). The population used in this study are the public relations professionals working with QNET in Sub-Saharan Africa. Specifically, the PR Manager and Assistant PR Manager were selected because of their expertise and how directly involved they are in the company's public relations activities.

3.6 Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who had in-depth knowledge and experience to answer the research objectives. This sampling technique was used because it is found in any

research paradigm and helps ensure that quality sample is located without biases so as to increase the reliability and trustworthiness of the findings (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024).

3.7 Data Collection Methods

3.7.1 Secondary Data

Secondary data was collected from existing literature, reports, online sources, and media coverage. This secondary data helped give context and understanding into QNET's public relations practice, the perception the public has of direct selling companies, and reputation management in general.

3.7.2 Primary Data

Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The interviewees were the PR Manager and Assistant PR Manager of QNET in Sub-Saharan Africa. These interviews were conducted with the aim of exploring and understanding the strategies QNET uses in managing the perception of the brand and their reputation.

These interviews also provided insights into the challenges that WNET faces when addressing misconceptions and how they overcome it. It reveals how QNET leverages on various public relations strategies to mitigate their negative reputation in Ghana.

The interviews helped in understanding the participants' experiences and professional insights, which is important when using the qualitative approach described by Roberts (2020), which emphasizes capturing the meaning and experiences of participants in their own words and specific contexts.

3.8 Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is a research method that studies data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or pattern related to the study which in this case is the influence of public relations on QNET's brand reputation (Shava et al., 2021). This data analysis process helped put information gathered under themes which were later coded, and this aided in the easy interpretation and understanding of the study.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Strict ethics were adhered to throughout the study and participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their consent were obtained before the interviews were conducted. Participants requested to remain anonymous, and their Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and they were assured that the data would be used solely for academic purposes.

3.10 Summary

This chapter outlines the design, approach, and methodology used in this research. It further reveals the use of the qualitative case study approach, and semi-structured interviews, to enable an in-depth investigation into the role of public relations in shaping the brand reputation of QNET in Ghana. The next chapter will present the findings and analysis derived from the data collected.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS, PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on presenting the findings of the study in relation to the interviews conducted with the Manager and Assistant Manager for Sub-Saharan Africa of QNET Ltd in Ghana. The chapter studies the data collected during the interviews and aligns it to the research questions and objectives of the study to determine the influence of public relations on QNETs reputation in Ghana. The key areas this study focuses on includes the challenges faced by the PR team, the strategies used to address misinformation and misconceptions, stakeholder engagement, evaluation of PR strategies, and recommendations for improvement.

4.2 Public Relations Strategies

The research sought to investigate the PR strategies utilised by QNET Ltd in their practice in Ghana and the PR team revealed a number of strategies that have helped them in the Ghanaian space. Public relation campaigns, social media, media relations and government relations are the key strategies

4.2.1 Public Relation Campaigns

Both participants revealed PR campaigns as one of the key strategies used by the company. Participant 2 states *‘Another key PR strategy that we employ is the use of PR campaigns. Currently we are running a PR campaign in Ghana called QNET against Scam... that was creating awareness to fight the misinformation and misrepresentation of our brand’*. They mentioned that there was also the MAMA campaign but could not speak much on it because it was before their time.

4.2.2 Digital media

Another important strategy that QNET Ltd uses in Ghana is Digital media. The company leverages on the wide reach of social media platforms by utilising it to reach their stakeholders especially their Independent Representatives (IRs) because they are based in different regions in Ghana. They have used social media to create a sense of community and this increases the love for the brand and encourages feedback.

Participant 2 emphasised this *'we've leveraged on it and we've created something like communities, you know that now social media channels have communities where you can group all the people who follow you, have interest in your product or your brand and engage them directly'*.

4.2.3 Media Relations

According to the PR team, media relations is an important PR strategy they utilise.

Participant 1: *'We've done more of media relations'*

4.2.4 Government relations

Government relations was stated to be another important aspect of their public relations strategy. One on one meeting with government officials they revealed has gone a long way in repairing their reputation and educating the higher ups on direct selling.

Participant 1: *'stakeholder engagement, specifically government stakeholders'*

It was mentioned during the interview that all PR strategies are tailor made for the Ghanaian market because all markets have slightly different issues and with Ghana, the main issues faced are misrepresentation and misinformation of the brand. Participant 2 revealed, *'We have market specific plans. So, for Ghana... misinformation and misrepresentation is one of the biggest*

issues we need to confront in this particular market. So, all these strategies that I've mentioned..., are tailored to meet the specific needs of the Ghanaian market'.

The participants revealed that they utilise the help of a PR agency in implementing and monitoring their PR activities in Ghana. *'We have a PR consultant who does that for us. And I can't mention specifically the tools they use'* Participant 2 also revealed that one of the agencies they use is called Carma. *'They give us real time analysis feedback on our, on our, on our mentions, on our reputation, on our performance in media, in traditional media, in social media, et cetera'.*

4.3 Public perception and reputation

4.3.1 Negative public perception

To further understand QNET Ltd.'s reputation in Ghana, Participants were asked what they believed was the public's perception of QNET's reputation in Ghana and both stated it was negative. Perceived reputation of QNET in Ghana was and both participants stated Negative.

Participant 2: *'There's a lot of mistrust, misconception because people don't actually know what we do. It's what they've read in the media space, what they've been told, experiences from others. And you know, there's generally, this fear of the unknown. And so it's been negativity and mistrust. That is what some people too are torn in between because they don't know who to trust.'*

Participant 1 revealed that with constant engagement with stakeholders especially with security agencies the perception is changing *'after engaging them one on one they understood, or they've got to understand the company policies properly which to some to a large extent change their*

perception about the company. But I wouldn't say the general public have changed their perception from what we do or the statements that we issue.' Participant 2 cautioned that it is a gradual process *'You need to keep on fighting, spreading the message. And that is one of the reason that we're running this year long campaign to ensure that the real message about the real QNET goes out there into the public. So it's a gradual thing'*.

The major challenges identified is the negative mindset and perception of the public toward QNET and direct selling as indicated above. Constant media and stakeholder engagements and campaigns are the main strategies the company is using to change that perception.

4.4 Challenges in PR practice in Ghana

4.4.1 Negative Perception

Negative perception of QNET and direct selling in general has stifled the efforts of the PR team in Ghana. That has been the number one challenge according to the team. Changing the perception of the public has been difficult and the team acknowledges that can seem impossible, but they seem optimistic that it would change in time.

Participant 1: *'I think the main challenge is there's a negative perception about the company.*

That is what is the number one challenge. Because when people have an opinion or a negative perception about you, it's really difficult to erase it. It takes a while up. So that makes it more difficult'

Participant 2: *You would have instances where people you're engaging have preconceived mindsets. That everything done online is a scam. I don't want to be involved... they don't even want to listen to you. They don't want to hear you'.*

4.4.2 Lack of Understanding and Education about Direct Selling

Another challenge is the lack of understanding and education about the company and the direct selling industry and they are just not willing to learn.

Participant 1: *'Some people do not understand the industry and are not ready to learn about the industry. So the mere mention of IR, direct selling, they don't want to hear it'*.

When participants were asked if they have put together any measures to correct this perception, they revealed they have. Participant 1 stated *'constant engagement of the media and government stakeholders'*. Participant 2 revealed that they are changing the perception of the public also through their campaigns that reveal the real truth about the company and they are against scams. *'We decided to come out and tell people the real truth about QNET. And whilst we focused on doing that, we are concurrently running a campaign to encourage people to tell them that we are against scams'*.

The complex nature of QNET's products, particularly those based on advanced science such as quantum physics, makes this more challenging. For example:

"Some of our products are based on quantum physics... People don't understand when you tell them there's a glass with a special pattern that can re-energize or restructure your water."

4.4.3 Cultural and Communication Barriers

The PR representative highlighted cultural communication barriers as another challenge. He expressed that receiving feedback is important because that is how you identify the problems.

Participant 2: *'Sometimes it's a language barrier. Sometimes it's a cultural communication barrier. A lot of people overlook that. Sometimes you have to look at the culture setting and see if your PR strategies are really connecting with the people in the grassroots'*.

This cultural expectation makes it difficult for QNET to build trust, particularly in rural or grassroots communities where digital solutions are still viewed with scepticism.

4.4.4 Lack of Direct selling laws

There are no laws that govern the direct selling business in Ghana, and this make it very difficult to regulate. Independent representatives end up just doing whatever they see fit which worsens the company's reputation and the authorities are also not able to do much about the situation because there are no guidelines to follow;

Participant 1: *'Ghana doesn't even have direct selling laws. That is also a big challenge because they are not laws to regulate it. The authorities use their own whatever understanding or their own judgment when it comes to dealing with issues on direct selling.'*

4.5 Stakeholder Engagement

4.5.1 Identification of Key Stakeholders

The PR team identifies Independent Representatives (IRs) as QNET's primary stakeholders

Participant 2 states *"They are the first point of call after our website and social media. What they tell these prospects, and what they don't tell them, is critical."* The IRs play an important role in shaping the public's perception of the company, because they are mostly the first point of contact prospects have with QNET. They also mentioned the media and government as key stakeholders. *'The media is the first... We go to government stakeholders second'*

4.5.2 Engagement Strategies

QNET engages with its Independent Representatives (IRs) through training and development programs tailor-made for the Ghanaian market to ensure they are educated enough to represent the company. The two key programs that were mentioned are the QNET Product Certification

(QPC): This program educates IRs on the products, their benefits, and unique selling points and the QNET Sales Training (QST): This program trains IRs on how to pitch products and communicate well with prospects. *‘We have training and development sessions, and I can give you the two main ones, Its QPC and QST. QPC is QNET Product Certification where we have our trainers that understand everything about the products, we sell... And the QST is the QNET Sales Training. So, we also train them on how, how they can pitch’.*

These training programs help IRs address prospects in the field in a more knowledgeable, confident, and capable manner.

The PR team also revealed they engaged the media more than the government by taking the media on junkets to their headquarters and product exhibitions. They engage the government through one-on-one interactions with them and introduce them to their products. *‘We have engaged in the media several more than we have engaged the government stakeholders. With the media, we’ve gone to the extent of even taking them to Malaysia to see our head office and to be part of our annual VCON celebration. All this we have done to make them really believe that there's a company or QNET is a genuine company. That really has product and sells product’.* Participant 1 further states. *‘. What we have done is this one on one engagement with them as well and showing them our product’.* In relating to government officials.

4.5.3 Addressing Stakeholder Complaints

The PR team actively addresses complaints from IRs, especially those that are related to misinformation and misrepresentation which disrupts prospecting: we’ve received stakeholder complaints that the issues of misrepresentation and misinformation hurts their business ...it affects their prospecting... it’s demoralizing for them.” States participant 2.

The PR team solves complaints from media and government that relate to IRs by conducting their internal investigations and prosecute.

Participant 1: *'we've had the media people go into the media to report that qnet employees have come to them... we check in our database to find out if they are in our database as an IR. Then we have internal disciplinary actions that we take against them. If it's something that has to go to court, we encourage the people that have been scammed, to go to the authorities and report and we support them'*.

The team uses such feedback to refine their messaging and campaigns, ensuring IRs are supported in their efforts to promote QNET.

4.6 Measuring the Effectiveness of PR Strategies

QNET employs a variety of ways in measuring the effectiveness of their public relations efforts. This includes feedback from stakeholders, and internal monitoring platforms in the form of a hotline that IRs can reach out through. However, the PR representative emphasized that data collection and analysis for ongoing campaigns, such as the QNET against Scams campaign, is still in progress;

4.6.1 Constant engagement with stakeholders

One on one feedback is received from stakeholders through constant engagement from the PR team. This enables the team know what their stakeholders especially those in the media and government sector are feeling

Participant 2: *'our stakeholders are one of our best ways of getting feedback...'*

4.6.2 WhatsApp hotline and email

To enable easy access to feedback and create a better relationship with its publics, the company uses a WhatsApp hotline and an email address that makes it easier for the public to reach them at any time with complaints, suggestions and other information. This hotline and email are a

great source of information. To get their hotline numbers across to their stakeholders, they make sure to include it into the press releases they send out.

Participant 1: *'the company has a hotline that we give out or we always put in our statements out there. So we through this hotline and email address they can reach us any day. They are able to reach us anytime, any day.'*

4.6.3 PR Agency

QNET relies on a Public relations agency for measurement of its PR activities. This shows that QNET relies on continuous monitoring to assess the success of their campaigns and inform future their strategies.

Participant 1: *'Yes, we have a PR consultant who does that for us. And I can't mention specifically the tools they use'*

4.7 Recommendations

4.7.1 Increased stakeholder engagements

Stakeholder engagements run through the entire interview and the PR team once again recommended an increase in their stakeholder engagement efforts. They believe that positioning QNET as a company that does not just sell supplements but promotes health and wellness to stakeholders would go a long way in improving QNETs PR practice in Ghana.

Participant 2: *'Increased stakeholder engagement. We will push more of the brands positioning out there. People should know what we stand for, what we do, what we're about.'*

4.7.2 Nationwide Campaigns

The team acknowledges that there have been campaigns that have been organised but are tailored to cater to specific regions or markets. They recommended that subsequent campaigns would be more effective and reach the entire target audience if it is done Nationwide and more in depth. They also recommended the campaigns be longer and more intense.

Participant: *'I think we should have more campaigns, and the campaign should be more ... I think we should have a more detailed campaign, a more a nationwide campaign which involves all the above the line and below the line tools intensive one'.*

4.7.3 Education

When asked about how QNET can improve the misconceptions the public has about direct selling, the team provided that more education needed to be done. Though direct selling is not a new concept, it is quite new to the Sub Saharan Region and this has posed a lot of misconceptions because the public does not have much education about the concept and its benefits and labelled direct selling as the future of entrepreneurship

Participant 2: *'Education. Education, education... We must present the benefits to the individual, to communities, to the nation, and most importantly, to the Sub Saharan African region, because it has a lot of potential... And direct selling is the future of entrepreneurship'.*

4.8 Discussion of findings

The response from the interview emphasizes Grunig & Kim (2021) assertion that Public Relation (PR) has evolved from just being a press agency role where information is passed on and communication is one way without room for feedback to nurturing and maintaining a positive relationship between an organisation and its publics like stated by Umaru et al., (2022).

Reviewing QNET's public relations strategies, it is seen that two-way communication is important and feedback is taken seriously and informs the next steps of all the company's strategies. Respondents highlighted PR campaigns. Media relations through press releases and media engagements, government relations and Digital communication through social media as their main strategies.

Another key information that was noted is that whatever strategy is used is tailor-made for the Ghanaian market since the objectives and key messaging of their global office might not necessarily be exactly what the Ghanaian market and this emphasises what Anani-Bossman (2020) opines that PR is at the forefront of reputation management by setting clear objectives, right messaging and communication tools among others. From the information shared, QNET is on the right path and is in tune with the modern concepts of Public relations and utilises the right strategies.

QNET as a representative of the direct selling industry focuses on transparency, two-way communication, and constant education to address misconceptions and manage its reputation. This emphasises the need for direct selling companies to utilise these tools for a better reputation.

The perception of the public and how the public views QNET and direct selling in general was said to be negative. The research revealed that this is because of direct selling being a new concept in Sub Saharan Africa and one that is misunderstood. People in Ghana mistaken direct selling organisations to be scams because some Independent Representatives (IRs) misrepresents the company to prospects. This emphasises the point that Seow (2022) made that, it is not easy to differentiate pyramid or Ponzi schemes from legitimate direct selling because unfortunately, due to a lack of regulatory scrutiny and public awareness. The misrepresentation of the brand and direct selling has caused the company various crisis situations. From the interview, it is evident that QNET utilises the SCCT framework in managing its crisis, they

categorize the issue by investigating in house and in most cases the crisis could have been prevented because it's always from the actions or inactions of third parties i.e. Their independent representatives. The next thing is to send out a press release stating the fact of the issue and clarifying the misconception that the issue is cause by the organisation, then the trust rebuilding exercises begin through public education campaigns and direct engagement with stakeholders. This falls in line with SCCT's rebuilding approach and shows transparency and accountability.

The study also identified various challenges that public relations faces in the direct selling industry in Ghana. Lack of understanding and education, no direct selling laws in Ghana, the cultural and communication barriers and the negative perception of people about QNET and direct selling poses as a challenge in managing the reputation of the company.

Engaging stakeholders is one of the frequently mentioned strategies that QNET uses in building and managing its reputation in Ghana. This emphasises the point by (McKie & Sriramesh, 2017) that QNET is more about building connections that are mutually beneficial to the organisation and its public and the best way to do that is through stakeholder engagements. The organisation constantly staying in touch with their stakeholders who they identified as their independent representatives, the media and the government helps promote a positive reputation and encourages feedback. They mentioned some innovative ways in which they stay in touch with these stakeholders are through trainings and social media when dealing with Independent representatives, junkets and organising media engagement programmes for the media and one-on-one meeting and junkets for stakeholders. This buttresses the point made by (Kujala et al., 2022) that stakeholder engagements involves two-way communication activities and stated some of these two-way activities as roundtable meetings, one-on-one conversations and negotiations, work-shops, training, conferences, and open-house days.

The study also revealed that QNET does not analytically measure the effectiveness of their PR activities. This poses as a threat to their reputation because they might not necessarily be informed on the gaps in their PR activities without analytical measurements. The study revealed that QNET uses feedback from stakeholders, whatsapp hotline and emails and their agencies. They mentioned they used a third party for media monitoring but not for real time analysis. Stevenson (2022) states that for PR practitioners to speak with authority when asked to prove their value to the organisation they need to measure the effects of their programmes, provide sound forecasts of future needs, and account for the resources they consume. Without these not being done, the impact of the activities and actions taken by the PR team cannot be said to be effective. Direct selling companies need to take measurement and evaluation of their PR activities seriously to be able to determine if the activities performed to build and manage their reputation are effective.

4.9 Chapter summary

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews conducted on exploring the influence of public relations on the reputation of direct selling companies using QNET Ltd as the case study. The interviews reveal the main PR strategies used by the company, the challenges that hinder the company's PR efforts and how they are tackled and the perception the public has about QNET in Ghana and how that is being managed. This chapter revealed that QNET has a negative reputation in Ghana which is due to the lack of education, cultural barriers and the lack of direct selling laws in Ghana which causes an unhealthy number of crisis situations in the country. Stakeholder engagements and PR campaigns and publishing disclaimers are some efforts being used to address these issues.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMENDATION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises the key findings of this study, presents the conclusions based on the research, and offers recommendations for improving public relations (PR) practices in the direct selling industry and in direct selling companies like QNET Ltd. It also mentions the areas for future research.

5.2 Summary of Findings

5.2.1 Public relations strategies

QNET from this study listed a number of public relations strategies they utilise in building and maintaining their reputation in the Ghanaian market. Public relations campaigns is one key strategy they utilise and revealed there is one of such campaigns currently running named the 'QNET against scam' campaign.

They also listed media relations as another strategy. They keep in touch with their media stakeholders through media junkets, engagements and dissemination of press releases.

They also revealed government relations as one key strategy where there have one on one interactions with the security agencies and take a few on junkets to their headquarters for them to experience the real QNET and be shown evidence that the company is real and not a scam.

Digital communications through the use of social media is another strategy that is used. The company is able to reach larger numbers and form communities that foster togetherness and helps their stakeholders feel seen.

5.2.2 Public perception and reputation

Even though QNET has implemented these PR strategies, they have not been able to eradicate the negative reputation that they have in the country because of the constant misuse and misrepresentation of the company's name by fraudsters. This has slowed down the impact of the PR strategies being implemented in the country.

5.2.3 Challenges in PR practices in Ghana

The negative perception the company has in Ghana has been a constant challenge in the activities of the PR team. A reputation takes time to build but it takes one crisis to see that carefully built reputation stained. And with QNET's name constantly being dragged in the mud, it makes their situation more challenging.

The lack of direct selling laws in Ghana worsens the situation because Independent Representatives who misuse the company's name are not governed by any laid down laws which makes controlling their way of business difficult. The authorities also find it difficult to prosecute these perpetrators because they are limited and do not know what passes as legal or illegal when it comes to direct selling in Ghana.

Ghana has various ethnic languages and cultures, and this is another challenge. Since independent representatives are based all over the country and being educated is not a requirement in practicing direct selling, PR messages must be drafted in a way that resonates with everyone whether educated or not.

5.2.4 Stakeholder Engagement

Effectively communicating with stakeholders in the company which the PR team revealed are the Independent Representatives (IRs), the media, Government and customers has gone a long way in mitigating crisis that rise up.

Different engagement strategies are used for different stakeholders. Independent representatives are usually engaged via training programmes that help them get to know the product they are selling and make them more confident when prospecting and through social media. Junkets to the headquarters of the company, product exhibitions and media engagement workshops are the key ways media is engaged. One on one engagements work best with government officials, and this has helped build a relationship with these stakeholders and garner feedback.

Feedback is received from stakeholders in diverse ways also. What works for one does not work for the other. Independent Representatives reach the company via their WhatsApp hotline and email, while media and government reach the PR team directly through one-on-one conversations and constant engagement by the PR team.

5.2.5 Effectiveness of PR strategies

No specific software or programme is used to measure the effectiveness of PR activities in the country. The company relies on feedback from stakeholders and their PR agencies as a way of measuring the impact of their strategies. This poses as a huge gap in their PR efforts. Analysing the sentiments of stakeholders alone is not enough to fully assess the impact. A more robust evaluation method is needed.

5.3 Conclusion

This study is to examine the influence of Public relations on the reputation of direct selling companies with QNET being the case study. The study concludes that it is important to constantly interact with stakeholders of a direct selling organisation in order to build and maintain a positive reputation. The terrain of direct selling differs from other industries because there are third party entrepreneurs who can affect the reputation at any time so constant education and training is important here. Public relations does have an influence on the reputation of direct selling companies but it takes a longer time and more effort to achieve the desired result.

5.4 Recommendations

Based on the interviews and research conducted the following recommendations are being proposed to enhance QNETs PR practice and the influence it has on the company's reputation and that of other direct selling organisations in Ghana and by extension other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa.

5.4.1 Enhance transparency and accountability

An increase in educational drives and campaigns that would equip the public on being able to differentiate between scammers or fraudsters and the legitimate QNET would help the company appear more transparent.

Prosecuting and publicly bringing these fraudsters to book would enable the public view the company as one that is accountable and transparent in their dealings. The right way of making money and how it is made should be made privy to the public and this would help the public

understand the compensation plans of direct selling and help in pushing the image of transparency.

5.4.2 Leverage on digital media

Enhance the use of digital platforms in reaching stakeholders and the public. Have a more interactive relationship with social media audience and this helps to send across information and receive feedback in a timely manner.

Investing in analytic tools that can monitor and evaluate social media engagements would help direct the PR team on what strategies to take and which ones make the most impact.

5.4.3 Strengthen stakeholder engagement

Constantly interact with stakeholders and respond to their feedback both offline and online in a timely manner. Always ensure that stakeholders are engaged after an unforeseen crisis to keep them satisfied and happy.

5.4.4 Proactive crisis management

Constantly train PR team on new strategies utilised in managing crisis. Create a comprehensive Crisis management plan that can be used when there are challenges or crisis. Conduct scanning of the horizon both internally and externally to gauge red zones that can cause issues and mitigate before it becomes a full-blown crisis.

5.4.5 Constant evaluation of PR strategies

Create key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure effectiveness of PR campaigns, such as media coverage analysis, sentiment scores, and stakeholder surveys. This would help in identifying areas in the PR plan that need improvement.

5.5 Areas for Future Research

In future, researchers can conduct research on the impact of public relations by comparing PR strategies across various direct selling companies or across Sub Saharan Africa. This can provide more insight into what other direct selling companies are doing and verify if the challenges they face are similar.

A comparative analysis can also be conducted between direct selling companies in different African countries to verify if the issues faced and strategies used are similar and works for both African countries.

5.6 Limitations of the Study

Access to information on direct selling in Africa was difficult to come by. It was also a challenge gaining access to the PR team of QNET in Ghana because they have a busy schedule. Some information was difficult or unavailable due to corporate confidentiality.

Public perception and reputation of the company relied heavily on subjective inputs from interviews conducted and the answers could have been influenced by personal biases.

Time constraints on the part of researcher and interviewees caused a delay in accessing information and the study which was conducted within a limited timeframe prevented the researcher from evaluating the influence of PR on the reputation of direct selling companies over a longer period of time.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction

My name is Deborah Naa Norley Adom. A graduate student at the University of Media, Arts and Communications (UNIMAC). I am conducting a study on the topic: "Exploring the Influence of Public Relations on the Brand Reputation of Direct Selling Companies in Ghana: A Case Study of QNET Ltd."

Public Relations Strategies

Can you describe the key Public Relations (PR) strategies QNET employs in Ghana?

How are these strategies tailored to address the specific needs of the Ghanaian market?

What are some recent PR campaigns you have launched, and what were their goals?

Do you use any specific tools or platforms to implement and monitor PR activities?

Public Perception and Reputation

How would you describe the public's perception of QNET in Ghana?

Have you put any measures in place to build and maintain a positive reputation for QNET in Ghana?

Was there a situation where the public changed its perception of QNET in Ghana? What did you do to achieve this?

Crisis Management in Public Relations

Has QNET experienced a crisis in Ghana? What is QNET Ltd's general approach to identifying and managing crises in Ghana?

Can you share a recent example of a crisis the PR team managed, and what strategies were used to address it?

How does QNET Ltd ensure effective communication with stakeholders during a crisis?

What role does social media play in your crisis management efforts?

How do you evaluate the success of your crisis response, and what lessons have you applied from past experiences?

Challenges in PR Practices

What are the main challenges you and your team face in maintaining QNET's reputation in Ghana?

How does the team address misinformation or negative publicity about QNET?

Are there any challenges when it comes to culture or the specific regulations of Ghana that affect your PR efforts?

Stakeholder Engagement

Who do you identify as QNET's primary stakeholders in Ghana?

Does the PR team engage with these stakeholders? If yes How?

Have you received any stakeholder complaints? If yes, what strategies do you use to solve them?

Effectiveness of PR Strategies

How do you measure the effectiveness of your PR strategies?

Have you had any successful PR Campaigns? If yes, Can you provide examples of successful PR campaigns and their outcomes?

Are there any specific systems you rely on for feedback?

Recommendations for Improvement

In your experience, what improvements would you recommend for QNET's PR practices in Ghana?

Are there any new PR trends or tools that you think QNET should adopt?

How do you think the QNET can improve public misconceptions about direct selling?

Conclusion

Do you have any additional comments or insights you would like to share about QNET's Public Relations practices in Ghana?

Thank you for your time.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW WITH PARTICIPANT ONE

Interviewer

Okay, so good afternoon and thank you for taking time to meet with me today.

My name is Deborah Naa Norley Adom and I'm a graduate student at the University of Media Arts and Communications, Unimac. I am conducting a study on the topic exploring the influence of public relations on the brand reputation of direct selling companies in Ghana.

A case study on QNET limited. Your insights are very important to me, and I truly appreciate your willingness to share your thoughts. Before we begin, I want to assure you that this conversation will remain confidential.

Your responses will be used only for research purposes and presented in a way that doesn't identify you personally.

If you feel uncomfortable at any point, you are free to decline to answer or stop the interview.

Please Do you have any other questions before we start.

Interviewee

I'm good.

Interviewer

Okay. Okay, so the first question I want to ask is on public relations strategies that QNET uses.

Can you describe the key public relations strategies QNET uses in Ghana?

Interviewee

I'm not going to describe; I'm going to mention them. We've done more of media relations, stakeholder engagement, specifically government stakeholders and we've done crisis management as well.

Interviewer

Okay.

And with these strategies, do you tailor them to the Ghanaian market since you are for SSA? are the strategies you use in other SSA countries different from what you use in the Ghanaian market?

Interviewee

There hasn't been much difference though. But we definitely have to put the country in perspective because we don't have the same dynamics in every country even though they are similar. So, the difference hasn't been much is we've had.

We are having the same issues in most of the SSA market crisis issues, reputational issues.

So, I don't think we have used relatively different strategies even though when we are going in with any activity that we propose, we factor in the cultural setting of that country in the activities that we propose. So, I think that's it.

Interviewer

Okay, thank you. What are some of the recent PR campaigns you have launched and what were the goals or the reasons why you launched those PR campaigns, if any?

Interviewee

Yeah, I think the ones that I remember the very three. The current one which is running in Ghana is the QNET against Scam campaign. It is to educate the public and kind of raise media

awareness about the fraudulent activities. That's misuse of QNET brand name in the country. The main reason is to educate the public and the media. So, we've done, we've had the say no campaign as well in Nigeria. Is this specific to Ghana?

Interviewer

Yes, specific to Ghana. So for Ghana, it is QNET against scam for now, the campaign that was run, I can't say much previously there was a mama campaign, but I can't say.

Interviewer

So the next question was, do you use any specific tools or platforms to implement and monitor PR activities?

Interviewee

Yes, we have a PR consultant who does that for us. And I can't mention specifically the tools they use but from where we sit, we have media mentions that we use in the media.

Interviewer

Okay. How would you describe the public's perception of QNET in Ghana?

Interviewee

Negative.

Interviewer

Any measures in place to build and maintain a positive reputation for QNET in Ghana? Are there any measures you've put in place?

Interviewee

With the constant engagement of the media and government stakeholders. We put any measures. That's what we do. Really? Constant engagement of the media and government.

Interviewer

Okay. And was there a situation where the public changes perception of QNET in Ghana and was there a situation where they decided that, okay, there was a challenge, then you put in your measures, then their opinions changed.

Interviewee

Yes, that was why I gave the example of the arrest in Kumasi said 487 people that were arrested. What we did was to engage the authorities because QNET was described as a Ponzi scheme. I wouldn't say.

And after engaging them one on one they understood or they've got to understand the company policies properly which to some to a large extent change their perception about the company. But I wouldn't say the general public have changed their perception from what we do or the statements that we issue.

General public is difficult to engage the general public but through the campaigns and this the QNET against come is the campaign, the second campaign that we are running in this country and maybe after that that's when we would know after whether it was effective.

Interviewee

Okay, so now we are going to crisis management in PR, has QNET experienced a crisis in Ghana. What is QNET's general approach to identifying and managing these crisis?

Interviewee

I mentioned two that I think were major crisis. When it was reported that QNET was banned in Ghana and the recent arrest of the 487 IRs in Kumasi. With the ban it was more of a legal issue because the company that was banned was QNET.

Which is different from QNET. So it was more of a legal issue and legal took it up and it was corrected. But with the 487 arrests in Kumasi, we had to engage the authorities because authorities who arrested came out and said they've arrested people engaged in Ponzi scheme referring to the company QNET as a ponzi scheme.

Interviewer

So, if I get you correctly, it is government relations. You use government relations to manage some of the crisis and some were also taken up by the legal.

Okay, so the next question is, how does QNET ensure effective communication with stakeholders during a crisis? How do you ensure that the communication between, I think earlier you stated something about constant communication.

Interviewee

Oh, yes. Yeah. Constant engagement of the media and government stakeholders.

Interviewer

What role does social media play in your crisis management effort?

Interviewee

Yeah, I deal specifically with PR when it comes to. So we have the social media team and I think they will be the best people to answer this question and yes, ma'am. Do you. I saw some

articles on social media. Like when you put out some disclaimers and stuff, does social media publish them? Is it put on social media?

Yeah, of course. Whatever that we do is put on social media as well. But as to the, as to the evaluation of that, I think the social media team will have to. Will be best to explain or say whether this percentage, how effective that has been. But there's always a replica because we try to use all channels available to us when we are putting out statements to debunk the misinformation and the disinformation out there.

Interviewer

Okay, next question is how do you evaluate the success of your crisis response and what lessons have you applied from past experiences? Is there any way you evaluated? Are there any special ways you use?

Interviewee

We don't have, we haven't done any formal evaluation from where I sit, but we would say we.

We are looking at the reception of the company at first, how the company was received more by the public and even by the media.

Who are our primary stakeholders? Initially, some media houses didn't want to even hear about the name. There was nothing unit that they wanted to publish. But today we would say they at least listen to us and publish our statement. Which means that there's been some improvement. But as to how much percentage we can say because we haven't measured.

Interviewer

Okay. So the next set of questions are on the challenges in your PR practice. What are the main challenges you and your team face in maintaining Qnet's reputation in Ghana? Since you stated

that you have a lot of crisis situations and the reputation is negative, are there any specific challenges you and your team face in maintaining their reputation or building it.

Interviewee

I think the main challenge is there's a negative perception about the company.

That is what is the number one challenge.

Because when people have an opinion or a negative perception about you, it's really difficult to erase it. It takes a while up. So that makes it more difficult.

Let me just leave it out there as to the negative perception there because there's always an internal challenge and external challenge and I would want to bring out more of the external challenge than the internal challenge. So the external challenge is more of the negative perception that is making it difficult.

Interviewer

Challenges with the media or your stakeholders per se. Apart from the general public, the media, government, do you find anything challenging when it comes to maintaining QNET's reputation? Are they receptive?

Interviewee

Yeah. And it all goes down to the negative.

When I say even the general public, I am including all the media and government stakeholders because everybody perceives QNET to be a Ponzi scheme kind of, or a scam.

So the initial reception is not always as good as expected, you know, so but you need to really persuade somehow or what's the goal? What's the word? The word is not coming.

But keep pushing really.

And when you get to that point and you where you sit down with them to explain then their perception really, it doesn't erase completely because after convincing them that this is what the company does, this is actually what the company does and these are even our company policies and all that we would now have to.

What is left for us to do is to prove to them that we are going by our policies that we have told them. So, I still think if it comes to the media and our stakeholders, it's still the perception.

Interviewer

Okay, but what exactly do you know what exactly causes those that negative perception? What are some of the issues that cause that negative perception? Is it something someone is doing? The company is doing.

Interviewee

That is what I have.

I said I didn't want to go to the internal, internal challenges because what qnet does is network marketing, what we have is we have networkers, and we have qnet as a company.

So the network is being referred to as employees of qnet, which is what we haven't been able to really distinguish between the two because if the distinction is not there as to the independent representatives of the company being self-employed businessmen and QNET is standing on his own. We will not be able to erase this perception.

Because when the self-employed businessmen who are hires use their own means which is not acceptable by the company to do business, then the company is referred to as the company doing the business in that wrong way.

Interviewer

How does the team address misinformation or negativity, negative publicity about Konet? How do you address it?

Interviewee

I think. How do we address it? I think you asked a question like that and I said we do constant engagement. What would I say? We issue statements. But I also want to add that we also address it by even coming up with campaigns like the QNET against Scam campaign to educate the public about some of these misinformation and disinformation.

Interviewer

Okay. Are there any challenges when it comes to culture or the specific regulations of Ghana that affect your PR efforts? Are there any things that maybe the Ghanaian law has stated that can affect your business here or the things you do to promote the reputation of the company?

Interviewee

On the contrary, Ghana doesn't even have direct selling laws. That is also a big challenge because they are not laws to regulate it. The authorities use their own whatever understanding or their own judgment when it comes to dealing with issues on direct selling. Because they are not laws governing the direct selling market in Ghana. Maybe we are yet to see one. Yeah.

Interviewer

So the next. Stakeholder engagement. So who do you identify as QNET's primary stakeholders in Ghana or main stakeholders in Ghana?

Interviewee

The media. The media is the first. The media is the first thing we have. We go to government stakeholders second. Okay. Then the general public. Then general. Okay. So that you.

Primary. So the primary are the media and stakeholders. And government stakeholders.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Okay. Does the PR team engage with these stakeholders? If yes, how? I know you've answered it numerous times, but I'd appreciate if you answer it again for me.

Interviewee

Yeah. Do we engage these stakeholders? Yes. Especially with the media. We, the media. We have engaged in the media several more than we have engaged the government stakeholders. With the media, We've gone to the extent of even taking them to Malaysia to see our head office and to be part of our annual VCON celebration. All this we have done to make them really believe that there's a company or QNET is a genuine company. That really has product and sells product. Oh, okay.

And yeah, we have done product exhibitions where we've engaged media several times and with government stakeholders. What we have done is this one-on-one engagement with them as well and showing them our product, some of our products that we have.

Interviewer

Okay, so you've not really taken, you are yet to take any of them to your annual gathering?

Yeah, VCON, like the media

Interviewee

I wouldn't want to mention.

This, this very last one we had a very high-profile government official? It's a government official. Somebody going to VCON, to witness as well. So, I think that's good. But the media is more. Because we take more numbers from the media than the government.

Interviewer

Okay, so the next question is, have you received any stakeholder complaints and if yes, what strategies do you use to solve them? Have any of your stakeholders come to you directly to complain about something the company is doing or to report to you? Maybe they don't.

Interviewee

Like we said, the media are primary engagement, and the media is the place where aggrieved individuals also go to. Okay, like when, when, when, when, when they are scammed or something and they go to the authorities, they are not getting the results they want, they tend to resort to the media. So, we've had the media people go into the media to report that quiet employees have come to them and we've had that the, the media coming to us to tell us that this person is, has come to them.

Interviewer

Okay, How do you, what strategy do you use to solve it? How do you solve the situation?

Interviewee

What we do is to get all the information, the names of the people that scammed them or if there's any way, we can identify those people, we check in our database to find out if they are in our database as an IR. Then we have internal disciplinary actions that we take against them. If it's

something that has to go to court, we encourage these, the people that have been scammed in any way to go, to go to the authorities and report and support them, to kind of take those people on.

Interviewer

Okay, so the next set of questions is effectiveness of pr and I think we've hit on that previously. But how do you measure the effectiveness of your PR strategies?

Interviewee

I think I alluded to something like that too, but it's more of if I even say positive mentions and in the media as well, because we don't have a specific tool that we use to measure it. So we only measure by. By our engagement with people, our stakeholders and the results that we get and the kind of. Yeah, the results that we get in engaging them or interacting with our stakeholders. That's how we measure it and our positive mentions in the media as well.

Okay. Have you had any successful PR campaigns? If yes, can you provide examples of successful PR campaigns and their outcomes so far in Ghana?

Ghana. The campaign that is the QNET Against scam that is still going on. It's still running, not completed yet. So But I think from the campaign the engagements that were done, we are, we are hoping we can have some collaborations with some of the government agencies. We are hoping that we would have some engagement with some of the government agencies.

From what you're saying, there's QNET Against Camp campaign is like one of your first ever full blown campaigns in. Exactly.

So, you really don't have any want to say measure it against to say this was the outcome or not?

You are yet to see. Exactly. Yes.

Interviewer

Okay. Are there any specific systems you rely on for feedback like when you need. When I do it, when the company needs feedback on what they are doing, your PR efforts, do you have any specific ways you measure feedback or you get feedback from people?

Interviewee

We get feedback from people but just like I mentioned, we have an agency to have their ways of getting feedback and all that and giving us that feedback. So feedback is normally from where we sit is what we get from people. Agency and. Yeah, okay. And agency and people. Yeah. In the public.

Interviewer

Okay. But how does the public reach you? The public needs to report something. Is there a way they can come to you directly as a company?

Interviewee

Yeah, the company has a hotline that we give out or we always put in our statements out there. Okay.

So we through this hotline and email address they can reach us any day. They are able to reach us anytime, any day.

Interviewer

Okay, so the next set of questions are. So we are almost at the end and the next set of questions are your recommendations for improvement. But in your experience, what would you improvements would you recommend for PR practices in Ghana? Maybe something you hope will be done or you hope to do for your PR practice in Ghana.

Interviewee

I think we should have more campaign and the campaign should be more wider than we are going because this campaign that is actually running is not the whole country is specific region. I think we should have a more detailed campaign, a more a nationwide campaign which involves all the above the line and below the line tools intensive one.

For me that's what I think should be done. Because we need that kind of intentional campaign. Be intentional about it and be out there in the faces of the people for a longer period of time. Until you see when you have campaigns that come or you're running a radio ad, you run the radio ad once a week. Once a week, three weeks. You are done. Yeah.

Let's say we have twice a week for three months, twice a week for six months. Then it sinks in. And while they are using the below the line tools, you use the above the line. It's like the people really get to face the issue head on like this. Then wherever you pass, you are seeing us. Yeah, for me, that would be my recommendation

Interviewer

Are there any new trends or tools you think you know should adopt? Maybe there's a new trend in PR or new to other companies are using that you think we should adopt?

Interviewee

Maybe. I'll have to research on that.

I don't know about PR tools, but I think we are underutilizing social media for me.

I think we should use more of the social media because the trend now everything is about social media.

Interviewer

Yeah, sure. How do you think QNET can improve public misconception about direct selling?
Do you have any extra opinions on what you think QNET needs to do to improve public misconception about direct selling?

Interviewee

More educational campaigns. More educational campaigns. Okay. Okay. Thank you.

Interviewer

So in conclusion, do you have any additional comments or insights you'd like to share about Qnet's public relations practices in Ghana?

Interviewee

No, thank you. Bye Bye.

Interviewer

Thank you so much for your time.

APPENDIX C

Interview with Participant Two

Interviewer

Thank you so much for availing your time to me. My name is Deborah Naa Norley Adom and I'm a graduate student at the University of Media Arts and Communications. I'm conducting a study on the topic exploring the influence of public relations on the brand reputation of direct selling companies in Ghana. And I'm using QNET as a case study.

So I assuring you that your confidentiality will be adhered to and If at any point in time during this interview you want to stop, kindly let me know.

Interviewee

No, I don't have any questions. We can proceed.

Interviewer

Okay, thank you. So we'll start with the public relations strategies that QNET uses. Can you describe the key public relations strategies qnet employs in Ghana?

Interviewee

Yes. So first of all, it's imperative to know that qnet is an international direct selling company, which means that we are global and being global, we have presence across Sub Saharan Africa and Ghana is one of our key markets. So we're going to be one of our key markets. We usually have a mix of PR strategies that we employ as part of a broader strategy.

So specifically for Ghana we have done a situational analysis and we've seen that when it comes to key PR strategies, it's a mix of social media.

Okay. So with social media what I mean is that we've leveraged on it and we've created something like communities, you know that now social media channels have communities where you can group all the people who follow you, have interest in your product or your brand and engage them directly. So one of our key PR strategies is to leverage on social media because social media is an aspect of pr.

The second thing that we've done actively is using word of mouth marketing or in our industry we term it as referrals. Referrals are the quickest and surest way of introducing people to our brand, our products and the industry.

We don't do regular advertising. What we do is it's kind of direct marketing, one on one.

So we have people called IRS who would tell somebody about the product.

They can end up being one-time users or they can be continuous users and when they are continuous users, they also refer people and they end. Another key PR strategy that we employ is the use of PR campaigns. Currently we are running a PR campaign in Ghana called QNET against Scam, QNET against Scams campaign was to create awareness to fight the misinformation and misrepresentation, of our brand.

We have other PR strategies, but these are the key ones that I believe are most important for Ghana.

Interviewer

Okay, so how are these strategies tailored to address the specific needs of the Ghanaian market? Is that something you do? Because I know you are for the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa. So do you tailor your strategies to fit the Ghanaian space?

Interviewee

Yes. So that was why I started by saying that as part of our broader strategy, we have market specific plans. So for Ghana, we've realized that one of the biggest needs, or after conducting our situational analysis, we've come to the realization that misinformation and misrepresentation is one of the biggest issues we need to confront in these markets, in this particular market. So all these strategies that I've mentioned, the social media, the PR campaign, the word of mouth, etc. Everything that we're doing, they are tailored to meet the specific needs of the Ghanaian market.

Interviewer

Okay, so I know you've mentioned something on this, but what are some recent PR campaigns you have launched and what was the goal for launching those campaigns?

Interviewee

Yes, so it goes back to the qnet against Scams campaign. Basically, the campaign was launched with the goal of fighting misinformation and misrepresentation.

What do I mean by that? For far too long, our name has been dragged in the mud in the Ghanaian market. People say that we are a scam company.

We claim that we will help people travel abroad and find jobs to make people get rich.

There's been a lot of representation, and it took us quite some time, unfortunately, to respond because we're looking at other strategies earlier and this took root.

So now this whole campaign, it's a one-year campaign, we are actively using this to tell our story, tell people about the real QNET, the truth about what we stand for and what we seek to achieve. Another important goal is to let the Ghanaian public know more about direct selling.

It's a relatively new concept or new way of marketing in the African continent and in Ghana in particular.

Although the industry has been there forever, it's new in the market. So a lot of people don't understand how it works.

But we always say that if you're able to buy on Amazon, if you go to other brands and you do online, online purchases, that's the same idea. So we're trying to introduce people to direct marketing and what they stand to benefit.

One other important goal that I must stress here is that we are trying to create a new generation of entrepreneurs in the country.

Because far too long we've had the idea that there's only one way to, you know, to work.

Do a 9 to 5, you know, or start your own traditional businesses, you know, but with this industry, you can do your regular 9 to 5 and do this on the side.

So you can even earn whilst you are, you're asleep or you're working or you are having your leisure time and you're also building vital skills.

Interviewer

And do you use any specific tools or platforms to implement and monitor PR activities? Like, is there any specific tool, software, something to monitor?

Interviewee

So generally, being a global company, it's critical that we do. We do. So we have a broad tool that we use. It's an international monitoring services company. I don't know if I'm allowed to mention their name.

Yes. So it's okay. So, yeah, they're called Carma. What they do is they give us real time analysis feedback on our, on our, on our mentions, on our reputation, on our performance in media, in traditional media, in social media, et cetera. So we have an idea of how our online reputation

looks like. So we do monitor peer activities. Also we have different stakeholders who give us direct one on one feedback which we also very much appreciate. Yes. So these are some of the two ways.

Interviewer

We are going to the next side, which is on public perception and reputation. How do you describe the public's perception of QNET in Ghana? How do you describe how the public sees QNET or how do you think the public sees QNET?

Interviewee

Okay, there's a 70,30 balance or 80, 20 balance. There's a lot of mistrust, misconception because people don't actually know what we do. It's what they've read in the media space, what they've been told, experiences from others. And there's, you know, there's generally, there's this fear of the unknown. And so it's been negativity and mistrust. That is what some people too are torn in between because they don't know who to trust.

Interviewer

Okay. Have you put any measures in place to build and maintain a positive reputation for QNET in Ghana? knowing that you, you've noticed that there is mistrust, negativity, are there any things you've put in place or measures you've put in place to curb that?

Interviewee

Yes. Like I mentioned earlier, we decided to take the bull by the horn now.

And what we've done is we've decided to come out as a company because we know that we are legitimate, we are in the right business.

We've been in this space for 26 years and the intent is to promote health and wellness.

And whilst you promote health and wellness, you can earn on the side.

So that is really our story.

So we decided to come out and tell people the real truth about QNET.

And whilst we focused on doing that, we are concurrently running a campaign to encourage people to tell them that we are against scams.

If you receive an offer that is too good to be true in the name of qnet, these are our information. These are like our information online.

We have a WhatsApp, we have an email address, we have a physical training centre that you can go to. We have different ways that you can reach us.

Just double check with us because if it's too good to be true, then hey, it's too good to be true.

So, yes, that's what we've done.

Interviewer

Thank you. Was there a situation where the public changed its perception of QNET in Ghana? Like, what did you do to achieve that? Has there ever been a situation where there was one perception about QNET and you've been, you've successfully been able to change that?

Interviewee

So public, you know that when you say public, I would like to bring them into stakeholders because Stakeholders come together to form the public. We've tiered the public into different levels, into different stages.

So we have authorities, we have security agencies, we have independent representatives that market our products. So we take them tier by tier, stakeholder by stakeholder.

So I'll give you a practical example. For some years now we've been trying to meet security agencies and tell them that the negative news here about qnet is not entirely true.

There's a real qnet and there's a syndicate falsifying records, using our hard won reputation to do people. So we were able to secure meetings where we presented the real QNET.

What's the real QNET? We sent corporate profiles, our regional general manager was around, our PR team was there, our lawyers were here, our international head for PR and communications was here in Ghana. And we met authorities, and we presented our case taxes, our social impact initiatives, our PR campaigns. And by the end of these meetings, very crucial crunch meetings, we met a lot of almost all the security agencies.

The feedback was why are people doing this to you? You need to keep on fighting, spreading the message. And that is one of the reasons that we're running this year long campaign to ensure that the real message about the real QNET goes out there into the public. So, it's a gradual thing.

Interviewer

Okay, thank you. So now we move to crisis management in pr. Has QNET experienced a crisis in Ghana? What is QNET's general approach to identifying and managing crisis?

Interviewee

Right, yes, we've, we've experienced multiple crises. We are no strangers to crisis. So we have a PR strategy, a global PR strategy and we break it down to layers. So there's one for the SSA region and there's one for Ghana. Ghana specific.

So the in country crisis management or reputation management strategy, what it does is it gives us direction as to what to do. What kind of crisis are we talking about? So for example, security agencies do a mass arrest of 500 plus people and they brand them as QNET operators, you know,

scamming people. Yeah, we have a strategy for that, we have a policy for that. So what happens is that we first do our own internal investigations.

One, all these names that are listed in the media house, in the publication, do we even know them? Are they our independent representatives? So as we do our checks and confirm whether they are or they are not, and thankfully they were not, we make time or we touch base with authorities, tell them that no, these people are not one of ours.

And what we do is we actually help authorities to correct this misinformation.

Normally what happens is one of this misinformation is corrected, the release is often retracted, or, you know, they just issue apologies and move on.

There are similar cases that come up, what they do is they get in touch, they ask us, do you know these people? These people operate with your name and go like, no, we don't know them. Then we all advise on the best course of action. So we've also helped authorities to prosecute some of these people because they are, they are drawing our reputation in the mud.

Interviewer

Yes. Okay, so from what you just said, can you. I think you mentioned something about a lot of people being arrested and is that a recent example of a crisis that the PR team has managed?

Interviewee

Yes

Interviewer

Okay, so I think that answers the next question. On you sharing a recent example of a crisis the PR team managed and what strategies you use to address it. So we'll move on to the third one. How does QNET ensure effective communication with stakeholders during a crisis? So we

know normally stakeholders get a little jittery when there's a crisis. What do you do to ensure that communication is there?

Interviewee

First of all, we keep it short and simple. Okay. What we have, what is our key message in crisis communication? There's key message. What's your key message? Qnet is not a scam company. And anyone misusing our name or misrepresenting us to scam people, we don't, we don't condone it, we don't support it. And we work with authorities and the security agencies to apprehend them so that they'll go through the right rightful, you know, procedure to get them tried or something like that. So that's one thing we are very clear about.

Even if you're an independent representative and you go, of course. And you don't do the right thing. We don't condone, we don't support. We are not into scams. We immediately hand you over. Once you're culpable, we hand you over to the authorities. So, our communication is spot on. Okay. You always have a key message that is short and concise.

Okay, thank you.

Interviewer

What role does social media play in your crisis management efforts? Do you use social media in managing your crisis?

Remember, one of the questions you asked was the PR strategies we employ. And I, and I mentioned that social media. Social media was a key component.

So how do we manage crisis effectively? Social media, we've come to appreciate the reach.

The reach, impact and connect how connected the world has become social media.

So something can happen in Accra and that somebody in Kuala Lumpur will see said in real time because of the power of these digital platforms. TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat.

So what we do is yes, we have a dedicated and highly responsive social media team. Immediately. We spot anything crisis immediately. Like I said, we have a strategy, we have a policy that we follow in house. The message is short and simple. We don't internal checks but we know that this is not us. We don't condone it immediately as we are responding in the various outlets. We also make sure that our responses go via social media. That is how we try to deal with some of these things on these panels.

Interviewer

So how do you evaluate the success of your crisis response and are there any lessons you have applied from past experiences? Maybe you had a crisis response that didn't work and you reevaluated it and used a different one that worked. Like how do you normally evaluate if your response worked or not?

Interviewee

Yes, that's a wonderful question and that is one thing that every PR specialist is very mindful of. You can have all the right plans and execute it to the best of your knowledge, but the ultimate question is how do your publics react to it? Was the timing the best? Was it appropriate? Was it what they were expecting? So yes, we've had multiple crisis.

Some of the responses were not what we wished for, others were spot on.

But overall I'll say that it's a day to day learning experience for the team and the best measure or evaluation point for our crisis of response response is feedback. So, once it goes out there, we normally go out to these stakeholders. Once again, for example, traditional media, we've, we've, okay, we've published multiple responses in this market. Is it working for you? They go

like, yes, it works because as a serious company, every time someone toys to their reputation, come out and debunk it. So it's working for others.

They go like, why don't you rule out an entire campaign to do this or some other obstacles.

They'll go like the rot has gone deep down into the fabric. So maybe you need to look at another way of overhauling everything so the responses are different depending on who you're speaking with and evaluation. We take it as and when it comes and it informs our planning for our next PR strategies and campaign. So that's what I can say.

Interviewer

So the next, we are moving to a different topic, which is the challenges you face in your PR practice. What are the main challenges you and your team face in maintaining Kill Net's reputation in Ghana? Are there any challenges you face, first of all?

Interviewee

Yes, there are challenges. If there are no challenges, then you are not doing a great job. So yes, there are challenges. First of all is mindset. You would have instances where people you're engaging have I have preconceived mindset. That everything done online is a scam. I don't want to be involved. You have instances like that. There are other instances where people close to a victim or someone who's been scammed, out of emotions, they don't even want to listen to you. They don't want to hear you.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Interviewee

There's also the issue of education and knowledge. I prefer knowledge. Some people do not understand the industry and are not ready to learn about the industry. So the mere mention of IR, direct selling, they don't want to hear it. And another thing is, because some people are used

to seeing everything physical with their eyes. So a company must have a physical office, must have everything physical. So once they can't relate, it's not visual for them. They can't connect. So, yeah, these are some of the things.

Interviewer

Okay. How does the team address misinformation or negative publicity about kill date?

Interviewee

How do we address misinformation or negative publicity about kill date?

Interviewer

I think you use You've mentioned you put out releases and stuff. Are there any other things you do to address when there's misinformation? Is there anything you are doing?

Interviewee

Yes. For you to be an effective communicator, taking feedback or listening is a very key component. So that's why all the things I've already said, we try and listen. We try to understand the point of view of the recipient who is giving the feedback. Sometimes it's a language barrier. Sometimes it's a cultural communication barrier. That is why there's cultural communication. A lot of people overlook that. Sometimes you have to look at the culture setting and See if your PR strategies are really connecting with the people in the grassroots. So we have that as well. So we basically listen and try and We form our PR practices to ensure that we're doing all the best.

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Interviewer

You mentioned something about culture. It brings me to my next question. Are there any challenges when it comes to culture or the specific regulations of Ghana that affects your PR efforts?

Interviewee

Oh, yes. Like I said, there's the culture of everything online is a scam. There's that perception There's this perception that, for example, some of the products we sell. So some of our products, it's based on quantum physics, quantum size. And some People don't understand when you tell them that there's a glass with a special pattern of it. That can re-energize your water or restructure your water. They don't get it. That's something that you need to take into reflection and see how best you can structure the information to be culturally accepted, yes, by your audience.

Interviewer

Okay. Now we move to stakeholder engagement. Who do you identify as your... As Q-Net's

main stakeholders? Maybe, firstly, you can tell us overall who your stakeholders are, then maybe your main stakeholders, who are the main stakeholders you interact with?

Interviewee

For me, as PR, everybody is a stakeholder. But primarily, I would point out the independent representative. Why do I choose the independent representatives? Because they are the first point, of call after our website, social media, our traders. They are the next point of call somebody who has never heard about the company we interact with. And in the future, evaluating All the information or misconception or love for the company will emanate from that meeting with our independent representatives. What they tell these prospects, what What they tell these prospects and what they don't tell them. So I see our independent representatives are primary stakeholders for me.

Interviewer

Oh, okay. So are they the main stakeholders?

Interviewee

For me, Because why? That all the other stakeholders in our industry, the practice in our industry, every other stakeholder can become an independent representative. So it's an open door for everybody. Yes.

Interviewer

Okay. I get that. So the next thing I'd like to know is, does the PR team engage with these stakeholders? If yes, how? So since you've mentioned that the independent representatives are your main stakeholders, do you engage with them? How? If you do, yes.

Interviewee

Yes we have training and development sessions and I can give you the two main ones, Its QPC and QST. QPC is QNET Product Certification where we have our trainers that understand

everything about the products we sell and they come into the Ghanaian market, meet all the IRs. It is done on a weekly basis. We try to teach them about our products, what are the constituents of our products, how it impacts their health and wellness, what is the unique selling point around this product and why we believe that if you are promoting this product, it would help you build a business and at the same time promote peoples health and wellness. So that is one and we have the QST, that is also another programme where we also bring these IRs together... the product certification course, we test these IRs to know their understanding, how they understood all the sessions that we've had for them and if there are any gaps, how best we can help them overcome it.

Interviewer

Since the IRs are your main stakeholders, have you received any stakeholder complaints, if yes, what strategies do you use to solve them

Interviewee

Yes, we've received stakeholder complaints that the issues of misrepresentation and misinformation hurts their business so you know these are Independent representatives or stand alone entrepreneurs so every time there is a report based on misinformation, misrepresentation, it affects their prospecting to go and sell a product, its demoralising for some of them. We usually get that feedback which also pushes us to reinforce the key messaging in campaigns and ensure that we battle this to the very ground.

Interviewer

We'll be moving on to the next. We're almost done. We move on to the next which is the effectiveness of your PR strategies. How do you measure the effectiveness of your PR strategies? I think you mentioned something earlier, but this is more direct.

Interviewee

So we recently launched the QNet against scams campaign. It's an ongoing campaign and we've just crossed the third month and we're still rolling it out. So for now to speak about measurement, I wouldn't have any data or any accurate feedback for you at this point of the interview, but I would love to, I'd love to share feedback with you on the measurements and evaluation. If you'll be kind enough to about no few months' time, I can give you a midyear analysis and review that I'm sure will be required.

Interviewer

Yeah. So from what you just said, that means my next question is answered. The question is, have you had any successful PR campaigns? From what you said, it looks like this is, you know, major campaign that you've had in the Ghanaian space.

Interviewee

There was, there was one that was called the Mama campaign and I'm afraid I can speak to that as at the time I wasn't on board yet if I may say that. But I really, it was just to create awareness about children in the market and yeah, I can't really speak to that. Okay.

Interviewer

Okay. Are there any specific systems you rely on for feedback? I remember earlier you also, you touched on that a little the feedback bit about getting feedback from the media. Are there any specific systems that you rely on for feedback?

Interviewee

There are multiple systems. So for Ghana, like I said, our stakeholders are one of our best ways of getting feedback. We have our own internal monitoring platform that I mentioned that we,

that we take direct feedback from and also we're hoping that this campaign will bring us very, very good feedback that we think we can rely on to make informed decisions going forward.

Interviewer

Okay, so now we are down to the last part. In your experience, what improvements would you recommend for QNETs PR practices in Ghana? Are there any things you think you need to improve on?

Interviewee

Sure. More stakeholder, increased stakeholder engagement. We will push more of the brands positioning out there. People should know what we stand for, what we do, what we're about. We just don't sell supplements but we're basically promoting your health and wellness.

And also more interaction, basically more interaction and more brand positioning.

Interviewer

Okay. Are there any new PR trends or tools that you think QNET should adopt?

Definitely. But one exciting thing I must say about working for this remarkable company is that we, we recognize that the PR landscape and the business landscape continually evolves. So every year there's, there's a new, there's a new kid on the block, right?

So, yeah, currently I'm, I have my fingers crossed, waiting to see the, the next kid on the block that we're going to use and train into 2025. So, yes, of course there's always new developments.

Interviewer

Okay. How do you think QNET can improve public misconception about direct selling in general? Not just about QNET

Interviewee

Education. Education, education. So we need, we need to be more deliberate and intentional doing that. We must present the benefits to the individual, to communities, to the nation, and most importantly, to the Sub-Saharan African region, because it has a lot of potential, a lot of young people who are ready to do more with their lives, to do more new things. And direct selling is the future of entrepreneurship.

Interviewer

Okay, this has been an amazing interview, but in conclusion, do you have any additional comments or insights you'd like to share about QNET's PR practices in Ghana?

And say. Yeah, just before that, may I say that I remember that I gave you the definition for the QPC, but not the QST. Yes.

The QPC is QNET product certification where we test the ielts on their knowledge about the products. Yeah. So that they can effectively speak about it. And the QST is the QNET Sales Training. So we also train them on how, how they can pitch. How they can pitch the product. So back to your question now. How we can improve the PR practice in Ghana? Is that the question?

Interviewer

So the question is. Yes. If you have any other additional comments on, or insights on how that you like to share about QNET's PR practices in Ghana.

Interviewee

I think this, basically my final comments would be this. There's way, way, way more room for improvement. The landscape is changing, the stakeholders are changing by the day, and PR is taking cognizance of the fact that we need to be ahead of the ball. And that's a very critical

aspect of PR to anticipate. And I think we are poised in staying ahead of the curve so that we can, we can effectively position our brand and turn the story around in the Ghanaian market. Hopefully one day you will use one day, which is very soon.

You hear that QNET is one of the most celebrated, excellent companies that have successfully made a mark.

Interviewer

I hope to hear that. Thank you so much for your time and I hope I can come, I can come back if there are any more questions along the way, do you almost.

Welcome.

Okay. Thank you.