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## Assessing the Practice of Public Relations' Practitioners in Creating Service Awareness and Reputation: The Case of Headquarters Commercial Bank of Ethiopia

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### Abstract

Public Relations (PRs) is a very important tool to facilitate the efforts of the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia (CBE) by undergoing public attitude and disseminating information to the public. However, the contribution of professional public relations is not given due consideration at CBE. The study aims to assess the practices of public relations' practitioners in creating service awareness and enhancing the reputation of the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia. The study adopted a case study design and qualitative research approaches. To collect data from the participants, using purposive sampling technique, the study employed in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, document analysis, and a questionnaire. The questionnaire was used to collect only participants' background information. The study analysed the qualitative data using thematic analysis and the survey data using frequency and percentage. The result showed that the public relations unit knows what is expected of it, carries out its tasks moderately, utilizes as many public relations tools to create service awareness and improve the reputation of Commercial Bank of Ethiopia. Nevertheless, the study mainly points out that less attention was paid to the professional public relations practice, and Public Relations was not considered a top management function. Lack of effective professional ability to set and evaluate strategic goals, an unrelated field of study of most of the PRs practitioners, lack of adequate human power, lack of adequate budget, and absence of adequate capacity- building training were the main challenges of the practice in Commercial Bank of Ethiopia. To solve the problem, the study forwarded some recommendations.

**Keywords:** /Awareness/Commercial Bank of Ethiopia/Practitioner/Public relations/Reputation/Service/

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The Profile of Commercial Bank of Ethiopia

Commercial Bank of Ethiopia (CBE) plays a vital role in the Ethiopia's economic development. Founded in 1942, it is the country's largest and leading commercial bank. According to the bank's June 2019/20 report, it had total assets of about 999 billion Birr and held about 735 billion Birr of deposits and about 107 billion Birr of all bank loans in the country. CBE had around 1500 branches across the country with 21.6 million account holders and more than 40,000 permanent employees (Commercial Bank of Ethiopia, 2019/20). Within its Business Development Wing, the bank has set up promotion and brand management department to carry out its promotional activities and to manage brand related matters (CBE Annual Report, 2019/20). Communications and Marketing Department consist of three units: Public Relations Unit, Promotion Unit, and Advertising Unit. This study assesses the practices of the Public Relations (PRs) Unit with a view of creating service awareness and enhancing the image of the headquarters (hereafter referred to HQ) of the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia (hereafter CBE).

### 1.2 Statement of the Problem

A public relations practice (PRs) is inevitable for the well-being of any organization as well as for promoting a conducive environment for an organization especially for profit making organizations such as banks and other financial sectors. It is a powerful pivot to achieve effective communication between internal and external publics (Boakye *et.al*, 2012). It ensures the consistency of the message and the flow of information communicated with the aim of Commercial Banks (CB) destination. Effective promotion of CB service attracts potential customers. It maintains the relationship with customers and stakeholders, and improves the image of CBs. Such a promotion requires PRs professionalism. In other words, PRs practitioners' awareness of what the profession demands of them is one of the important factors in today's marketing and customer behaviour analysis. CBE is aware that the service promotional work must be done by PRs practitioners. According to the CBE Marketing Survey Report (2018/19), there are numerous banking services accomplished by the PRs practitioners. These activities include but are not limited to setting strategic objectives and effective messages, preparing tools to disseminate information, creating awareness, and evaluating the achievement of the strategic objectives. But the report overlooked a very important aspect of the PRs function, which is the managerial function.

CBE's overlooking of PRs's managerial function is not a surprise. Davis (2007) study has reported that PRs's practices are not considered a management function in various organizations. Not only PRs's managerial function is overlooked, but also the PRs discipline. More often it is assigned with exclusively 'low end' tasks and roles that invariably underestimate its value. Other findings also show that many companies recognised of the value of public relations only in times of crises. Little do they know that the basic cause for a firm's poor public image is the gap that exists between communication, understanding, and collaboration between the organization and society at large (Lerbinger, 2006). According to Ströh (2007), most organizations have paid little attention to PRs while some organizations do not understand the role that PRs plays within an organization and have failed to position the discipline. Therefore, the home for PRs functions in most organizations is still not clear, which implies the importance of introducing PRs departments in to many organizations.

The basic reason for firms to establish PRs departments is to better communicate with their key publics (Gillis, 1997). A mixed approach study of the contributions of public relations in selected Nigerian banks produced three major findings: (1) All banks have public relations philosophy which strives to build and sustain a positive image for their institutions and to be proactive in meeting the needs of their stakeholders, (2), all the banks surveyed had public relations departments, variously referred to as "Corporate Affairs, "Public Affairs" or other names, and (3), the head of the public relations department was not a member of the executive management. The findings imply, for banks that do have not a PRs

department, the importance of establishing public relations departments and involving their department heads in executive management or decision-making.

Establishing a PRs department is not enough to better communicate with various stakeholders. What is even more important is staffing the department with PRs professionals. Findings show that some firms run the PRs practices by non-professional practitioners, while others use the marketing department. Although marketing and public relations are interrelated, it is important to remember that the former cannot substitute the latter, especially in communication and loyalty-oriented stakeholder relationships. A study of Kenyan banks conducted by Kuria (2010) found that the banks have applied product-oriented marketing practices for customer relationship to a great extent. The findings indicated that (1) employee-oriented customer relationship marketing strategies are in place and are being improved to a large extent, (2) communication-oriented customer relationship marketing strategies are used to a moderate extent, and (3), however, loyalty-oriented customer relationship marketing activities are not enhanced in the commercial banks in Kenya. The study recommends that the Kenyan commercial banks need to critically reconsider several aspects of the customer relationship marketing strategies, particularly in the areas of technology adoption and its interaction with customer relationship marketing implying the importance of supporting marketing with PRs practices.

The PRs department of Commercial Bank should also consider the culture of its stakeholders such as religion as it influences the effectiveness of its performance. There are a few studies that have included religion as part of an assessment of public relations activities and cultural patterns. For example, Gaither and Al-Kandari (2014) has included the cultural circuit to examine the PRs activities and cultural patterns of selected Islamic banks in Kuwait. Their study used some Islamic orientation values such as religious authority, affinity with the past, fatalism, and common kinship, attachment to eternal life and spirituality and idealism. Based on their findings, it was suggested that religiosity has a significant impact on PRs activities and cultural patterns in Middle East banking activities.

In the Ethiopia context, as research findings and experiences show, many organizations do not have public relations departments, and even those that do have perform their roles and functions less effectively, and apply a one-way communication models to execute the organizations' mission and vision at the expense of mutual benefits. The study of Getenet (2019), which was carried out in the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation, uncovers that the PR practitioners (1) could not get horizontal and vertical professional training that enhances their profession, (2) are not fully independent, (3) have budget constraints, and (4) have no professional association (in Ethiopia) that guarantees PRs practitioners, and these all affect public relations effectiveness. Another study conducted by Mesay (2019) at the Ethiopian Airlines found that the thoughts of public relations professionals and ideas of employees of the organisation are rarely taken into account because the communication trend is usually one way. The study also reported that the senior management including the CEO is not easily accessible to the media and employees, leading to poor communication between employees and management and unhealthy relationship between the media and the company. The study further discloses problems observed on the publications of the PRs at the Ethiopian Airlines such as inappropriate language choice and headline choices as well as word and page limits.

Tesfaye's (2018) study, examining the practice and challenges of public relations in Ethiopian public universities, uncovered that the main role the universities' public relations offices played is not well understood by the university's community as well as the external publics. A study examining the roles and functions of public relations' practitioners at eight first-generation public universities in Ethiopia showed that the public relations practitioners at these universities (1) performed their roles and functions predominately as technicians in implementing their routine communications activities, (2) applied one-way symmetrical, press a gentry, and public information model. The study further reveals that the public relations practitioners did not execute their managerial roles and functions across all the universities in the study (Salilew *et al.*, 2017).

Similarly, Minas (2009), who investigated the practice of public relations of Ethiopian Telecommunication Corporation at the Central Addis Ababa Zone, found that the performance of the PRs department in creating and maintaining favourable image in the minds of the public was at moderate level. According to him, the department has not utilized its resources and efforts to create a better image than

the corporation did at the time. This could be attributed to a lack of knowledge on part of the management (executives) as to what the PR profession really entails and a lack of professionalism on the part of the PRs practitioners.

An undergraduate study, entitled “An assessment of public relations practice with reference of Awash International Bank”, conducted by Victoria (2014), found that the company’s PRs department did not only rely on a few traditional PR tools such as television, radio, and website to reach its diversified stakeholders, but also used them ineffectively; it ignored customer complaints and feedback, did not use two-way communication, and did not conduct research to evaluate its PRs activities. A similar study, “An assessment of public relations practices in commercial bank of Ethiopia”, conducted by Saron (2014), uncovered that CBE was not using the major public relations tools effectively. However, these reviewed studies, which are relatively older, are more of quantitative, and have not assessed in detail the role that public relations practitioners undergo in creating service awareness and reputation at CBE. The local studies conducted on banks have also not investigated the professionalism of PRs practitioners. A number of studies documented that in many organizations PRs practices are performed by non-PR professionals and the profession is undermined (Lerbinger, 2006; Ströh, 2007; Salilew *et al.*, 2017; Mesay, 2019).

The researchers also assumed that the value given to the PRs at CBE is minimal. A preliminary assessment made at the CBE shows that the PRs unit has received less attention, the role that the unit plays is misunderstood, and its role overlaps with the role of other departments such as marketing. This may indicate that the PRs practices are performed by non-PRs professionals who lack the knowledge and skills required by the profession such as using two-way communication, setting, using and evaluating strategic objectives, and conducting research that enables reaching informed decision. Carrying out the core elements of all successful public relations practices such as research, strategic planning, effective selection of communication tools, and evaluations of programs can be difficult without professional public relations practitioners (Moss & DeSanto, 2005).

However, to the best of the researchers’ review of related literature, there have been done a few or no case studies investigating the practice of PRs practitioners in creating service awareness and enhancing reputation at the HQ of CBE. Hence, to fill these gaps, this study investigated how the PRs practitioners themselves perceive the PRs practices, the roles they play, the major tools and communication types they use to create awareness of CBE service and enhance the image of CBE. The study intended to answer the following research questions:

1. How do PRs practitioners at CBE perceive the PRs practices in terms of creating service awareness and image building of CBE?
2. What are the activities undertaken by PRs practitioners to create service awareness and image building in CBE?
3. What are the major tools used by PRs practitioners to create service awareness and building image of CBE?
4. What challenges do prevent PRs practitioners from creating service awareness and enhancing the image of CBE?

## 2. Theoretical Frameworks

PRs uses hybrid theories adapting from different disciplines such as communication, management, etc. However, four communication models identified by Grunig and Hunt (1984) are commonly applied in public relations studies: Press agent/publicity model, the Public Information Model, the Two-way Asymmetrical Model/ persuasive communication, and the Two-way Symmetrical Models. They are used to explain how public relations practitioners practice PRs related activities effectively and ethically.

### 2.1 Press Agent/Publicity Model

This model is the earliest PRs model emerged in the late 19th century, essentially serves the propaganda agenda (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). It is a one-way communication model where information flows from the sender/source to the receiver. The goal of the press agent model is to attract attention rather than gain understanding. In public relations, it is applied to disseminate information related to the sale of products or services. Accordingly, the Press agent had been called persuasion for short-term advantage through the use of truth bending and even distortion (Four Models Of Public Relations Media Essay, 2003). Despite the fact that ethics involved to this model are highly questionable, it is used by the media as people tend to believe what they see rather than understanding it.

The limitation of this model is that it is cunning: it undermines the accuracy or trustworthiness of what is communicated, does not seek audience feedback, and does not encourage entities to conduct audience analysis research (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Due to its manipulative nature, it was labelled as “the public be fooled” in the early era. According to Eric Goldman (as cited in Four Models Of Public Relations Media Essay, 2003), “People who send out the message ... [do not take into account] second party’s response, comment, point of view and so on”. The model does not encourage organizations to change their act or behaviour, but the publics. Press Agency attempts to alter the act of publics whereas does not have the intention to change the behaviour of the organization (Four Models Of Public Relations Media Essay, 2003). This study attempts to assess whether this model is applied by PRs practitioners in CBE, and if so, from what perspective.

### 2.2. The Public Information Model

Public Information Model, the second oldest model, is one of the four models of public relations. It is a one-way communication model used to disseminate information to the public. This model is revolved from half-truths to more ethical practices. Although, the model does not intend to persuade the public or change their attitudes, it aims with supplying the press and public with accurate information on issues that the public values and interested in knowing (Laskin, 2009). Unlike to the Press Agency model, the readability and readership of the Public Information model is quite high. The model is mainly practiced by the government, non-profit association, and business companies to publicise their company, products and services, build brand awareness and brand image, position the brand, and others (UKEssays., 2018). According to Grunig and Hunt (1984, p. 22), using this model, “The public relations person objectively reports information about the organisation to the public”. Though the model supplies the press and the public with accurate information, it is criticised for it communicates only in one direction, does not work on changing the public’s attitude and behaviour, and does not carry out formative research to reach informed decision, as can be inferred from Table 1.

### 2.3. The Two-way Asymmetrical Model

It is a two-way (unbalanced) communication model that dates back to the 1920’s, and was known as synchronic model. It presents PRs information in a more “scientifically persuasive” way to communicate with key audiences. “They (public relations practitioners) use what is known from social science theory and research about attitudes and behavior to persuade publics to accept the organization’s point of view and to behave in a way that supports the organization” (Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p. 22). Therefore formative research that assess attitude is a key element of this model. The model is particularly popular in advertising

and consumer marketing areas that are interested in increasing an organization's profits. Put it other way, it is practised by competitive businesses.

However, as its name suggests, the model favours the organization over the public. According to the Four Models Of Public Relations Media Essay (2003), some people do not believe in public relations practitioners because persuasive communication, applied through the two-way asymmetrical model, can be used negatively to exploit the consumer. This is particularly observed in advertisements as the advertiser enjoys the benefit more than the consumer. That is, no mutual understanding is maintained between organization and its publics, as can be deduced from Table 1. The current study seeks to assess whether CBE PRs practitioners apply this model to conduct attitude and behaviour related formative research to persuade target audiences so that the latter utilize CBE's services.

#### **2.4. The Two-way Symmetrical Model**

Two-way (balanced) communication model, formerly known as diachronic communication model, is used to maintain mutual understanding between the organization and its public. It underlines the benefit of the organisation itself and its public. According to Grunig and Hunt in Laskin (2009), this model is based on an open dialogue between the parties i.e. the management and the public. As a result, the organization and the public came up with a solution that would benefit both. According to Van Dyke and Verčič in Salilew *et al.* (2017), negotiation, conflict resolution, mutual understanding, and mutual respect between the organization and its public are the desired outcomes of this model. It applies formative research to assess public understanding.

The limitation of this model is that it is not applicable in the PR practices. Many authors (e.g. Kunczik, Pieczka, and L'Etang in Laskin, 2009) concluded that the two-way symmetrical model is just an inapplicable utopian ideal that has not place in real public relations practice but rather a purely academic concept. This is particularly true in developing countries where access to resources and power are unequal practices, and attempting to practise symmetrical public relations might constitute self-destructive discourse strategy for the least powerful participant (Leitch & Neilson, in Laskin, 2009).

In summary, it is important to point out that the four distinct public relations models reviewed above need different expertise. The Press A gentry Model and the Public Information Model do mostly require technical communication skills and do not require professional and managerial knowledge. Whereas, the asymmetrical and the symmetrical communication models, therefore, represent "professional" public relations because practitioners normally have some theoretical knowledge of communication, social science, and management in addition to technical communication skills (Grunig & Kim, 2021). Accordingly, this study tries to investigate which models are predominantly applied in the public relation practices at CBE and with what effects.

The four distinct models of public relations, which are identified by Grunig and Hunt, are summarized in Table 2. 1.

Table 2.1: The four distinct models of public relations

MODELS	PRESS AGENCY	PUBLIC INFORMATION	TWO-WAY ASYMMETRIC	TWO-WAY SYMMETRIC
Purpose	Propaganda	Dissemination of information	Scientific persuasion	Mutual understanding
Nature of communication	One-way, truth not essential	One-way, truth important	Two-way imbalanced	Two-way balanced
Research	Little, press clippings only usually	Little – readability tests possibly, readership surveys sometimes	Feedback Formative research Evaluation of attitudes	Formative research Evaluation of understanding
Historical figures	PT Barnum	Ivy Lee	Edward Bernays	Bernays, educators
Where practised	Sports, theatre, product promotion	Government, non-profit orgs, structured companies	Competitive business	Regulated business and modern flat structure companies
% of market	15%	50%	20%	15%

(Source: Macnamara 2012: 189)

## 2. Methods and Materials

*Setting of the study:* The setting of the study was the HQ of the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, Gambia Street. The HQs has many employees, including public relations unit that are directly related to service awareness activities.

*Study design and approach:* The study adopted a case study design. Case study research involves collecting data describing events (Czarniawska, 2004). The study used the case study form of research

design to provide answers to the research questions that focus on a case, the HQ of the CBE. The study also employed qualitative research approach. This approach was preferred as it is appropriate for collecting data about organizational function, i.e. creating service awareness and enhancing image building (Apuke, 2018).

*Population of the study, sample size, and sampling technique:* The study population consisted of employees of the CBE HQ. CBE has many employees in PRs unit, Marketing and Advertising, and Sales Promotion departments. The target population of the study was the PRs practitioners of CBE's HQ, which consisted of nine employees: one PRs unit manager and eight public relations practitioners. Using purposive or judgmental (comprehensive) sampling, the study selected these nine informants to participate in the study because they were very close to the research topic and worked in the creating of service awareness. This type of sampling is very useful for gathering important information that cannot be obtained by other choices (Maxwell, 1996).

*Data collection Methods:* the study used in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to collect primary sources and document review and structured questionnaire as supplementary information instruments. The questionnaire is used to gather only the participants' background information such as gender, age, educational status, work experience, and work position. It was distributed to the nine qualitative data participants. Further, the study held the in-depth interview with the CBE PRs unit manager and an FGD<sup>3</sup> with eight PRs practitioners to get diversified perceptions and concepts on creating service awareness in CBE. Moreover, to assess the practice of public relations practitioners in creating service awareness and image building, the study reviewed recent documents (2018-2021), prepared by the CBE (or PRs unit), such as brochures, magazines, and annual report.

*Data Collection Procedure:* To collect the required data, a letter of cooperation was first written to the HQ of the CBE by the Department of Media and Communication Studies of Jimma University. Next, based on the agreed schedule, an interview was conducted with the CBE's PRs unit manager. Third, FGD was conducted with eight PRs practitioners focusing on the research questions. For the in-depth interview and the FGD, the researcher used interview guideline, voice recorder, and a note pad. Fourth, the researcher reviewed three published documents from the CBE's PRs unit. Fifth, the interview and focus group discussion (which were conducted in Amharic, an Ethiopia's federal government working language) were transcribed into Amharic. The student researcher had translated the transcribed data from Amharic to English, and the translated data had been checked and corrected by two English language instructors, from Jimma University. Finally, the collected qualitative data were thematically arranged and interpreted.

The instruments' dependability and transferability was assured by communication experts.

*Methods of data analysis:* To get meaning from the in-depth interview and the FGD discussion, the gathered data were analysed thematically. Where appropriate, data were triangulated and narrated as narrative forms are the basis of qualitative research disciplines. The data analysis followed steps such as data reduction, data display, and conclusions. Brief summaries and field notes were written during the data collection to highlight important recurring themes and patterns (Miles & Huberman, 2002). Further, the collected data were coded and analysed manually. That is the data were analysed by identifying, interpreting and reporting patterns with in data. The quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics i.e. frequency and percentage.

*Ethical considerations:* Several ethical issues were considered in this study. These are (1) *Confidentiality:* the participants were assured that the information collected would not be disclosed to anyone outside of the study and that it would remain confidential for the purposes intended. (2) *Permission:* Prior to carrying out the study, the researcher obtained permission (formal written letter from Jimma University). (3) *Informed consent:* Potential research participants were fully briefed on the procedures involved in the research and were asked to give their oral consent to participate. (4) *Privacy:* Participants remained anonymous throughout the study and even to the researcher and his advisors to ensure privacy.

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<sup>3</sup> More than one FGD could not be conducted because of the limited number of PRs practitioners at the Head Quarter. To compensate this limitation, instrument of data collection triangulation has been attempted.



## 4. Result

The result part presents the data that answer the four research questions posed in the introductory part. The research questions relate to PRs practitioners' perception of PRs practices, the PRs practitioners' activities in creating service awareness and image building of CBE, the PRs tools used by PR practitioners in creating service awareness and image building of CBE, as well as the challenges that hamper PRs practitioners from creating effective service awareness and enhancing the image of CBE.

### 4.1. Respondents' Demographic Information

This section presents the respondents' general demographic backgrounds: age, sex, educational status or level, educational qualification, work experience, and job position in the CBE.

Table 4.1: Distribution of respondents' sex

No.	Sex	Frequency	Percentage
1	Male	8	89%
2	Female	1	11%
Total		9	100%

Source: own Survey data, 2021

Table 1 presents the distribution of study participants by sex. Accordingly, it was observed that the majority (n=8, 89%) of the respondents were male, while one (11%) was female. The conclusion is that the public relations department of the CBE is male-dominated. The finding is consistent with a local study (Victoria, 2014) which found that, among PRs practitioners at Awash Bank in Ethiopia, 78.19% and 21.81% were male and female, respectively. However, the literature shows that in western countries like the US, the majority of PRs practitioners are women. Our findings contradict Angela's (2018) report which states: "Women, who are 50.8 percent of the US population, make up 70 percent of the public relations workforce but only 30 percent of executives." The qualitative data of our study shows that the person in the management position of PRs unit in CBE is male. The findings imply the importance of improving the gender balance in the public relations unit in CBE both in the technical and executive positions.

Table 4. 2: Age distribution

No.	Age interval	Frequency	Percentage
1	31-35	1	11%
2	36-40	5	56%
3	Above 40	3	33%
Total		9	100%

Source: own Survey data, 2021

Table 4. 2 shows the age distribution of the study participants. In relation to the age intervals, the data were divided into three age groups: 31-35, 36-40, and above 40. Among the respondents, the majority (n=5, 56%) were in age range of between 36 and 40. While three (33%) respondents were found to be above 40 years old, and one (11%) respondent replied that he was between 31 and 35. However, the findings differ somehow from Victoria (2014) who found that the age of most participants is ranged from 18 and 30 years. The implication is that these age groups are overall energetic to discharge the routine practices, knowledge and the skills that social media in general and the IT in particular require in PRs practices.

Table 4. 3: Educational status/level/ of respondents

No.	Educational level	Frequency	Percentage
1	1st degree	5	56%
2	2nd degree	4	44 %
Total		9	100 %

Source: own Survey data, 2021

Table 4.3 shows the educational status of the study participants. Accordingly, from the total respondents while the majority (n= 5, 56%) had a first degree, the remaining four (44%) had M.A degree in various disciplines. The finding is in line with Victoria (2014) who reported that most of the respondents participated in his/her study had 1<sup>st</sup> degree and diploma. This shows that the majority of the informants were qualified in terms of the type degree is concerned. The findings show the attention the CBE has given to the establishment of the public relations unit/department, in contrast to most organizations that have given little or no attention to PRs (Ströh, 2007). However, their educational background was not related to the discipline of public relations as shown in Table 4 .4.

Table 4.4: Field of educational distribution of respondents

No.	Field of education	Frequency	Percentage
1	Management	2	22%
2	Business Administration	2	22%
3	English Language	4	44%
4	Journalism and Communication	1	12%
Total		9	100%

Source: own Survey data, 2021

The educational background distribution of the study participants is presented in Table 4.4. As the data shows, while the majority (n=4, 44%) have an English language background, the remaining come from Management (n=2, 22%), Business Administration (n=2, 22%), and Journalism and Communication (n=1, 12%). Of course, these disciplines are related to PRs, but they never substitute it. Put it other way, the PRs unit of CBE is staffed with non-professional PRs practitioners implying a misunderstanding or undermining the role professional PRs practitioners play in enhancing good public relations activities in the CBE. The finding is in line with Ströh (2007), who reported that ... some organizations do not understand the role that PRs play within an organization and, therefore, have failed to position the discipline. These non-professional practitioners can undertake the technical practices of PRs, but not the professional elements. The finding implies PRs practitioners of CBE implement the Press A Gentry Model and the Public Information Model which do not require beyond technical communication skills.

Put it other way, the PRs unit of CBE did not use as required the Asymmetrical and the Symmetrical communication models which generally require "professional" public relations knowledge relevant to communication, social science, and management in addition to technical communication skills. Support for this finding comes from Grunig and Kim (2021) who wrote that the Press A gentry Model and the Public Information Model do mostly require technical communication skills and the Asymmetrical and the Symmetrical communication models do require professional and managerial knowledge as well as technical communication skills. The finding also agrees with Moss and DeSanto (2005), who underscore that without professional public relations practitioners carrying out the core elements of all successful public relations practices such as research, strategic planning, and effective choice of communication tools and evaluations of programs can be difficult. Another support to the finding comes from Dozier and Lauzen (2000), who stressed that practitioners must be aware of what it takes to be excellent, and they must have the knowledge and skills to carry out the organizational mission. Hence, this calls, on the side of the executives of CBE, understanding what practitioners perform and how their activities produce the right programs, influence strategic planning, help achieve organizational goals, and valuing the power of the public relations in an organization.

Table 4. 5: Work experience of respondents

No.	Years of experience	Frequency	Percentage
1	Less than 5 years	3	34%
2	6- 10 years	2	22%
3	Above 10 years	4	44%
Total		9	100%

Source: own Survey data, 2021

Table 4.5 presents the distribution of respondents' work experience and position. Respondents were asked for the number of years they had worked in the public relations unit of CBE. According to their responses, four (44%) of them worked for more than 10 years, two (22%) of them worked from six to ten years, and the remaining three (34%) worked for less than five years. This is an indication that the majority of practitioners have experience in the practices of public relations of CBE and are aware of most of customer needs and know how they better be handled through public relations.

Table 4. 6: Work position of respondents

No.	Position	Frequency	Percentage
1	Managerial	1	11
2	Non –managerial	8	89
Total		9	100

Source: own Survey data, 2021

What is shown in Table 4. 6 is the work position of the study respondents. As to the data, the number of participants in managerial and non-managerial positions is one (11%) and eight (89), respectively. The finding implies that CBE's PRs unit consists of a manager and technical staff which meets the minimum requirements PRs demands..

## 4.2 Perception about PR Practices

One of the four research questions this study seeks to answer is the extent to which PRs practitioners are aware of what the PR profession demands with regards to creating service awareness and enhancing image of CBE. PR practitioners are expected to know that the PR discipline takes care of an organization's reputation with the aim of getting an understanding and the necessary support for influencing attitude and behavior (Harrison & Bak, 2017). This indicates that the PR perceptions benefit CBE by creating awareness of the organizational objectives and enhancing the relationship with the public. With this idea in mind, and to obtain information that answers the research question, questions related to understanding strategic objectives, building trust, positive attitudes towards the PR profession, commitment, and dissemination of service-related information were asked as part of the in-depth interview and FGD.

**Understanding objectives:** One of the objectives of PRs is to create mutual understanding and collaboration with customers. The FGD participants were asked to mention the PRs objectives they were aware of. P4 (participant number 4) replied that PRs unit had many objectives in CBE service operations. One of them is establishing good relationships with different potential publics, such as customers, stakeholders and employees to make mutual understanding and cooperation. Other respondents gave similar answers.

**Building trust:** For the CBE to be more effective, it is important to get the trust from its potential and actual customers. Building customers trust is one of the tasks of PR practitioners. One of the FGD

participants, P5, said the following, and his response was supported by the rest of FGD participants who nodded their heads:

*When PR practitioners deliver PR practices with sincerity, thoughtfulness and energy, when they really know what they do, and have extensive experience in the profession, the results speak for themselves. They are able to establish trust with the publics. Building trust with publics is an important component of public relations.*

**Commitment and attitude towards PR:** Many of the activities done in the PR technical unit are routine and tiresome. When work is done with such an attitude, the result can be negatively affected and this requires commitment. With regards to the question “To what extent are you aware of the importance of commitment to accomplish PR activities?”, all the FGD participants replied that commitment is very important to accomplish daily routines. In the words of an FGD participant, P8: “To overcome boredom and achieve the predetermined strategic objectives of CBE, most of the PR unit practitioners are committed and feel responsible.”

**Dissemination of information:** PRs practitioners should also know that one of their responsibilities is to disseminate the CBE service- related information. Accordingly, most FGD participants replied that they are aware of what information dissemination involves. They listed the following: Providing information to the public that fosters understanding and promoting the CBE in a favorable light, communicating accurate information about CBE programs, establishing an open line of communication, keeping the public informed about different services, explaining the goals and objectives of a CBE to customers, promoting CBE’s image and reputations, facilitating favorable news coverage, and updating the public on CBE’s services and products.

This data indicated that CBE’s PRs practitioners are aware of what is expected of them in terms of PRs practices in general and service awareness creation in particular. The question, however, is whether this awareness will be put into practice; the evidences given next answer the question.

### 4.3 Activities Undertaken by PR practitioners

The second research question addresses the activities undertaken by PR practitioners in creating service awareness in CBE. The question focuses on the themes of message construction, publishing tools and event organization, media relations, dissemination of accurate information, image building, managerial function of PR, and performance evaluation.

**Message constructing:** It is a very important point in PR communication unit. Accordingly, one of the roles of PRs practitioners is constructing messages. The message mainly revolves around of CBE’s service and product awareness. To throw light on how the message is constructed, an interview was held with the manager of CBE’s PRs unit. He speaks: “In the case of CBE, the public relation function is a great way to build and create service and product awareness and its activities promote the bank’s reputation” (personal interview with the CBE Manager). The manager also explained that, in CBE’s PRs unit, in fact every message is constructed based on customers’ interests. Before important messages are constructed, district managers discuss on it to reach consensus. He adds: “Before we construct important messages regarding bank service and product, we discuss accordingly with all district managers. Currently, CBE has 30 districts in different regions of the country. There are millions of customers and stakeholders in every district.”

**Publishing tools and organizing events:** Creating awareness and building good image cannot be realized without PRs tools. These tools include but are not limited to annual reports, brochures, articles, company’s newsletters, pamphlets and magazines, diaries and calendars. FGD P6 said: “My role in the organization is to prepare different publications such as brochures, magazines, flyers, posters, banners, and organize special events, press conferences and press releases for print and broadcast media, and to disseminate information through social media”. FGD P1, P4, P5, and P7 also strengthened the response given by P6. They explained that the role of public relation in the CBE is to provide information to the customers through different print and broadcast media such as brochures, magazines, press releases, press

conferences, and organized events. Hence using all these tools and events, the bank tries to provide information about its products, services, facilities, schemes, achievements, etc. The finding agrees with Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, and Toth (2012) who say that through these publications, the shareholders, general public, employees, customers, and traders can be reached and a good awareness and image of banks can be created.

In addition to the mainstream media, the bank also uses social media such as Facebook to reach large and specific audiences, as reported by the FGD discussants. Although the social media platform, on which information can be uploaded by PRs practitioners, plays a great role in reaching information to the general audience, the researchers underscore that, it is important to carefully select popular national mass media or Popular TV Channels, to reach information to the general public, and that is called media relations.

**Media relations:** According to Zerfass, Linke, and Röttger (2014), media relations is among the functions of public relations. Dealing with and communicating with the news media is the most important part of media relations, the process of disseminating information via the media (TV, radio, internet, newspapers, etc.).

Once the message is constructed, what comes next is selecting appropriate popular national and international media for dissemination. The mass media have great relative influence as a communication. Vehicle. They have the power of publicity especially when carefully chosen. The CBE's PRs unit manager expresses: "The CBE's PRs unit conducts media survey to choose popular media to reach the general public. This takes into account how the general public perceives, selects, and uses media in the various situation of their private and social life". The findings support Tench and Yeomans (2009) who says: "Securing positive publicity through the media still remains at the heart of Public Relations practice". The finding has also got support from another source: "The Public Relations practitioner's work with the media is to convey the most effective impression for the bank. This is to attract a positive publicity" (Zerfu, 2014).

**Disseminating accurate information:** The other role of CBE's PRs practitioners is to disseminate accurate information to the public. In this regard, FGD P7 says that the tasks of PRs practitioners are to disseminate accurate information and facts about the activities and services that the bank offers to customers to maintain positive awareness and attract the attention of target publics. The other members of the FGD also supported P7 with nods and smiling faces. Hence, the dissemination of accurate information builds trust and strengthens the relationship between CBE and its stakeholders. The findings imply that the PRs unit of CBE applies the Press A Gentry Model, which focuses on disseminating information to gain public attention, and the Public Information Model, which focuses on disseminating accurate information.

**Construct image:** To create positive impression of the services the CBE offers, it is important to create and strengthen mutual understanding, interest, and the customer's trust. Well thought out messaging and dissemination play an influential role in image building. As the interview made with the CBE's PR unit manager uncovers, the PR's unit needs to improve its knowledge and skills to develop and disseminate information for improving the image of CBE.

*We have awareness and concepts of [how] to build well a [good] image and create a positive impression and credibility of CBE service and products. Maintaining interest and confidence in existing services and products is important. We must have a [professional] public relations unit to help staff develop and disseminate information with the media or manage events. Mutual understanding must be established between CBE stakeholders and customers (face-to-face interview with CBE Manager).*

The last statement in the indented quote "Mutual understanding must be established between CBE stakeholders and customers", draws attention. According to the Symmetrical Communication model, mutual understanding between an organization and its public can be created through two ways, open and balanced communication. This type of communication plays a great role in building CBE's image. Hence, the findings imply the importance of trying to introduce, if possible, the Symmetrical communication model as well as professional PRs practitioners to the public relations practices of CBE, when possible.

The findings remind us to pay attention to Akturan and Şevik (2016) who writes: “PR is the art of presenting a company (or person) to the public, usually via the media, ideally in a positive manner that improves the reputation of that company (or person) and subsequently impacts positively on that company's sales/ uptake of that company's services/ the company or individual's overall reputation”.

From the forgoing evidences, it can be concluded that the activities of PRs practitioners at the CBE include among others : identifying the tasks to be disseminated, objectives of dissemination, the target public, and appropriate dissemination media such as flyers, pamphlets, annual reports, posters, brochures, newspaper, magazine, TV, Radio, social media, and official website of CBE. Regardless of the fact that the PRs unit works hard, its activities cannot produce the required impact without the good support of the executives, which is a serious problem in many organizations as stated in the statement of the problem, and without the application of the Asymmetrical Communication Model and the Symmetrical Communication model, at least to some extent .

**Managerial function:** According to Lautrette *et al.* (2007), PRs is a management function practised by a wide range of organizations. Organizations or corporates including CBE are managed by executives. Hence, to effectively run the corporate and to achieve institutional goals, the management of institutions needs to understand the attitudes and values of its public. The executive should also empower the PRs unit to have roles in management decisions. When it is said that PRs is a managerial function, it means that PRs unit builds positive relationships with various publics to effectively manage the organization's image and reputation. Put it other way, the senior director of Public Relations office acts as a counselor to the executives and as a mediator, helping to translate private aims into reasonable, publicly acceptable policies and actions provided that the office is empowered to exercise those responsibilities. The CBE's PRs unit manager explained that he works to achieve the bank's goals and objectives and to promote the CBE's reputation and image. However, the data from the FGD participants uncovers that while the PRs unit manager is represented in the executive meeting of CBE, his decision making power is not as such influential. FGD P1 witnesses:

*Public relations unit was a member of the management. The unit took part in management discussion with other CBE department, but they were [it was] not influential in decision making. However, the CBE's PRs unit has been serving as source of information by analyzing and interpreting about internal and external situation in CBE.*

**Performance evaluation:** The other role of PRs practitioners is evaluating success and failure. This is done to improve and enhance the relationship that CBE maintains with key constituents. PR evaluation determines the value or importance of PRs program or effort, usually through appraising or comparing against a set of CBE goals and objectives as well as CBE's mission and vision. Evaluation provides insights to help shape the future activity, reputation and image of a particular CBE services, leading to a better decisions and improved outcomes. According to Goi and Yong (2009), the nature of evaluating public relations practice involves the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of program, personnel and products for use by specific people to reduce uncertainties, improve effectiveness, and make decisions about what those programs, personnel and products do and affect.

But evaluating PRs practice calls for professional knowledge and skills from the PRs. The data from this study show that CBE's PRs unit is aware of what to evaluate but lacks the knowledge and skills of evaluation strategies. Most of the FGDs participants say that they are aware of what should be evaluated- the outputs and the outcomes. They point out that, the output evaluation covers core measures across result; for example, how many visitors visited the website, how many posts, news release, magazine, brochures were seen, and how many people attended the event, and so on.

The FGDs participants also reported that outcomes must be evaluated. According to them, the outcomes evaluation strategy measures the effect of the communication on the target customers and stakeholders. It asks whether the communication has increased the target customers' understanding, changed their attitude to the service or awareness, increased the trust or preference, had an impact on the intention to do something or decision to use CBE's service. They know all these not because that they are qualified PR professionals but experienced PRs practitioners. The survey data shows that majority of the

respondents (n=4) had an experience of above 10 years, two had an experience of between six and ten years, and the remaining three worked below five years. This is an indication that majority of practitioners have experience in the field of PRs and are aware of most of customer needs and how they should be handled through better public relations.

Despite the fact that they are aware of what and when to evaluate outcomes, they do not evaluate strategic objectives for two reasons. For one thing, they do not set the strategic objectives of the PRs unit. For the other, as to the FGD's discussants, they lack professional knowledge and skill on how to set and evaluate strategic objectives.

Data from the questionnaire also supports the qualitative finding. As the statistical analysis revealed, the participants in this study come from different specialization: English language (n=4), Business administration (n=2), journalism and Communication (n=1), and Management (n= 2). This data indicates that the majorities of the informants were qualified in English language, and only two of the respondents who are qualified in management and journalism and communication are professionally related to the PRs profession because journalists and managers take some courses of PRs at the M.A. and B.A. level. Nonetheless, hardly one is qualified in the field of Public Relations. For the PRs unit, producing the right program, strategic plan, and activities requires PRs professionals and using the Asymmetrical communication model and the Symmetrical communication model. Support for this finding comes from Grunig and Kim (2021) who wrote that the Asymmetrical and the Symmetrical communication models do require professional and managerial knowledge as well as technical communication skills.

With regards to the work position of the study participants, the survey data shows that while the PRs unit manager's (n=1) expertise is in management, the remaining eight play non-managerial position. That is to say their role is technical function implying that they are incapable of setting and evaluating strategic objectives. The results of the study is in agreement with Salilew *et al.* (2017) which showed that the public relations practitioners at first generation public universities predominantly carried out their roles and functions as technicians in implementing their routine communication activities. Put it other way, absence of PRs qualified experts in the department of CBE hinders the organization from achieving its goals as required. The finding insists on to take into account the advice of Dozier and Lauzen (2000) who stressed that practitioners must be aware of what it takes to be excellent, and they must have the knowledge and skills to carry out the mission of the organization.

Effective evaluation of outcomes is time focused. Evaluation of strategic plan becomes more effective if it is carried out quarterly. However, as the FGD participants reported, the evaluation is carried out always at the end of the year, and what is evaluated is the strategic plan of the CBE and not that of PR's unit for the latter does not set strategic plan. Support to our finding comes from Victoria (2014), who uncovered that the public relation's department of Awash International Bank lacks periodical monitoring and evaluation of PRs activities. The finding shows that the CBE's PRs unit has not well considered the advice given by Castelli (2007), who underscores that knowledge and expertise are seen as a significant tool in public relation practices today.

The data from the study indicated that to help shape the future activity of a particular CBE service, reputation and image, and to lead to a better decision and improved outcomes, applying effective strategy measurement and evaluation to communications program is vital in the CBE's public relations practice.



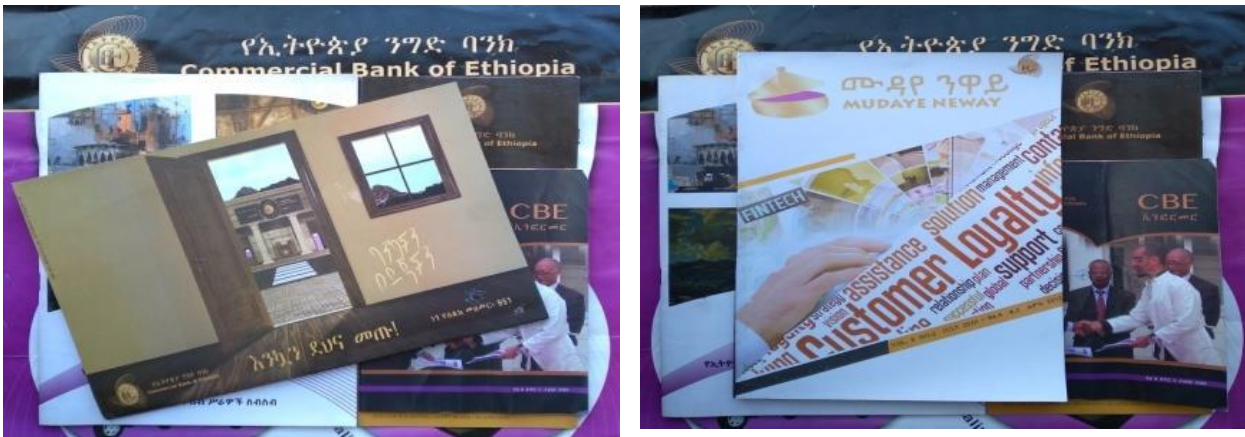
#### 4.4 Public Relations Tools

“What are the PRs tools used by PR practitioners to disseminate service information and to enhance CBE’s image” is the third research question aimed to be answered by this study. When applied effectively and efficiently, PRs tools play significant roles in creating public awareness about the services CBE gives and building the image of an organization. They are very important to create public awareness about the services CBE gives, change customers’ attitudes, and initiate stakeholders to utilize the services the bank offers. As the finding from the interview, FGD, and document review shows, CBE used traditional and Social Media to disseminate service information. The traditional media CBE uses includes but not limited to brochure, magazine, annual report, and newsletter. The tools differ in the message they convey.



*Figure 1:* Source: CBE brochure screen shot

**Brochure:** CBE brochure precisely informs the readers about general facts of CBE such as back ground, structure, vision, mission and values. They also give reliable and credible information about CBE’s diversified products and services, service accessibility, new service of the bank, promotion, marketing, stakeholders, customers relationship of the bank, digital banking technological advantages and CBE service, and contact addresses. From the review, it can be said that the brochures briefly explain important information about CBE program with their attractive pictures.



Figures 2 & 3: Source CBE magazine: front and back screen shot

**Magazine:** The name of the magazine is CBE Mudaye Neway (Mudaye Neway<sup>4</sup> Magazine). Its purpose is to provide information to create awareness and to promote CBE’s image and reputation. Its content deals with message from CBE president, historical development of the CBE, the national economic development of Ethiopia, including human capital development, and the factors influencing the CBE HQ and its banking sectors’ customer loyalty. It also gives further information about the CBE corporate social responsibility, rules of loan, photo and other entertainments. Thus, one can conclude that, because of its diversified contents, magazine enables CBE to disseminate service information, to enhance CBE’s image, and to reach out its diversified stakeholders.

**Annual report:** The study also reviewed CBE’s annual report document of 2018/19 including public relations unit. The first part of the Annual report focuses on the introduction. The introduction precisely informs about the mission and vision of the CBE. Further, it informs public relations unit’s main objectives, which aims at providing timely and relevant information for internal and external community to create awareness and to build positive image and keep reputation of CBE. The next part of the annual report displays highlights of previous year performance using different photos of CBE Share advisory, CBE committee, executive managements, and auditor report.



Figures 4 & 5: Source: CBE annual plan front and back screen shot

<sup>4</sup> Precised translation: Case for money

The findings from the brochure, magazine, and the annual report imply that the Public Information Model is applied to disseminate accurate information. However, further study is required to assess the level of accuracy (effectiveness) of dissemination tools.

Findings from the interviewees made with the CBE manager and PR practitioners also support the finding from the document analysis. According to the explanation of the CBE's PRs unit manager, to stimulate positive perceptions of the stakeholders and customers and to create its service and product awareness, CBE's public relations practitioners used different media tools such as electronics, print, and social media. He says:

*We must use different media tools and tactics to create service awareness and enhance relationships with these publics. The common public relations tools we use regularly are News Release, Magazine, Newspapers, press releases, brochures, pamphlets, posters, letters, postcards, calendars, agenda books, audio and video messages, national and regional TV channel, radio, FM radio in Addis Ababa and regions, magazine, newspapers and social media which are most easily accessible (Personal interview with CBE Manager).*

Similarly, almost all PRs FGD discussants reported that CBE uses the above mentioned tools. It is important to remember that printed tools can attract stakeholders when prepared effectively, and the finding supports Banki (as cited in Saron, 2014) who argued that written and printed communication produce higher levels of comprehension to readers. In addition, as the interview made with the manager of the bank's PRs unit and PRs practitioners shows, CBE's PRs unit used effectively the traditional media channels like EBC, Fana Broadcast, Walta TV, ENA and regional TV channels, Addis TV, and FM Radio.

However, it is important to remember that social media are more preferable than the traditional media to reach fast and to influence better the online publics. Respondent I7 explained:

*The advantage of social media is that it allows direct communication with the customers and this enables saving time and money. It also allows customers and stakeholders to reach informed decisions with regards to CBE's services. Also it is free and can be accessible to huge audience; in addition to be used alongside [the] traditional media, it is more preferable than the traditional tools. With social media, business people can engage easily with their customers. Business people will have a visible presence on the website and receive real time feedback.*

This indicates that CBE uses diversified or mixed PR tools (main stream and social media) for creating service awareness and building the image of CBE. The finding in relation to social media has got support from Mergel and Greeves (2012), who said that Social media is a powerful tool and can be used by organization to help connect theories of organization and leaders with low cost to achieve intended missions.

The data implies that CBE uses social media as the tool of public relations to create service awareness of CBE, to enhance relationships within the online publics, to share information, experience, and perspective throughout community-oriented websites and it is becoming increasingly significant in the online world. The finding also supports Lattimore and Toth (2012), who reported that using all PR tools, the bank [their case study] tries to provide information on its products, services, facilities, schemes, achievements, etc. These all publications reach the shareholders, general public, employees, customers, and traders. According to Mubushar, Jaafar, and Ab Rahim (2020), public relations tools could establish service awareness through remind and recognition. Public relations are concerned with the management of communication between a bank and its stakeholders.

**Impact of PR tools on CBE.** With regards to the impact of using different PR tools, the interviews made with the PR manager and PR practitioners show that effective application of PRs tools such as electronics, print, and social media have enabled CBE to achieve its objectives and goals as well as its mission and vision. Support to this finding comes from Saron (2014), who underscores “using a mix of tools is to be efficient and effective in getting the attention of the public (p.35). Public relations tools are found to be very cost effective and often give greater degree of control more than broadly targeted advertising campaigns. The finding is different from Victoria (2014) who uncovered that the Awash International Bank used PR tools ineffectively. The difference could be attributed to the time when the studies were conducted. These days, using PR tools including social media is becoming culture and mandatory to become competent. The other reason could be that the PRs practitioners in the current study are more educated than the PRs practitioners in the study of Victoria (2014) implies capacity to use PRs tools in a better way.

Conversely, the finding is in line with Graham and Avery (2013) who say that using social media, which is part of PR tools, such as LinkedIn, Twitter, Face book, YouTube, Blog and other social sites has two main benefits: creating service awareness and networking (building relationships online). Social Media is important to the sharing of information, experience, and perspective throughout community-oriented websites and it is becoming increasingly significant in our online world. The finding is also in support of Kelleher (2009), who states that (1) digital media are one of the easiest and most effective areas for bank to establish and develop relationship with their publics, and (2) key customers directly, and that online interaction is positively and significantly associated with relational outcomes such as trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality. Our finding implies that, when using social media, CBE applies Asymmetrical (imbalanced) two ways communication model prioritizing its benefit. However, further study is important to assess the extent to which this model is applied to address customers’ complaints and feedbacks.

However, most of the main stream media (tools) such as radio, TV, magazines, and newspapers used by CBE are tools of one-way communication and dominantly for external stakeholders. The finding implies that CBE applies Press A gentry and Public Information Model, a one-way communication models, to distribute organizational information. Therefore, there is no way to handle customer’s feedback. The finding has got support from the study of Salilew *et al.* (2017) which reads “The model of communication practiced is one-way symmetrical and press a gentry and public information model”. The finding is also in concurrent with Victoria (2014) who found that Awash International Bank did not use two ways communication approaches especially in addressing customers’ complaints and feedback. On the other hand, if handled effectively, the social media can be used as a two-way communication tool to collect immediate feedback from external and internal customers. The finding implies the importance of applying Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) two-way symmetrical communication model depending on CBE’s context.

#### **4.5 Challenges PR Practitioners Face**

The study sought to know the challenges the PRs unit faces while creating service awareness and building image. The data from the FGD discussants disclosed that all the CBE PRs unit practitioners had encountered a number of challenges. These challenges include, but not limited to, lack of effective and adequate media for internal communication, lack of trained staff or skilled human power on public relation profession, absence of job description, lack of budget, lack of due recognition from the management, lack of knowledge about PR strategies, language barrier, and misunderstanding about PRs at all levels of PR practitioners, top management, and the bank employees.

Consequently, the required service awareness as well as the image and reputation of the bank could not be enhanced as it should have been. For example, without adequate communication media related resources it is difficult to interact with the internal public and to change the attitude of the same. On top of that, since unprofessional PR practitioners lack credibility of the PRs profession, they get difficulty in managing crises, managing media, changing publics’ wrong perception on public relations, building the image of CBE based on truth and evidences, evaluating the performance of the PRs unit, and changing the general public’s attitude towards the services CBE gives.

To single out one of the many challenges, let us focus on the knowledge of PRs strategies formulation. Lack of knowledge about PRs strategies and setting these strategies impacts CBE negatively. The CBE PRs unit manager and the FGD discussants unanimously admitted that they do not know how to formulate PR strategies to meet CBE's objectives, goals, mission, vision, and values. For example, to achieve the goal of CBE, planning PRs campaign is important. As the FGD discussion uncovered, all CBE's PRs unit practitioners had not practiced or held public relations campaign up to the time this data was collected. The reason was that the practitioners had not the knowledge and skill to practice it. P2 said: "I and my workmates lack [the] understanding about and adequate skills for strategic public relations campaign and communications". The finding implies a strategic public relations campaign demands PRs professionalism as it is more of research based, technical, process-oriented, systematic, and deals with objective setting and evaluation.

The finding indicate that the PRs practitioners need to know more about the technique of strategy setting to identify how to prepare public relations campaign. Furthermore, they need to know how to formulate strategies to meet CBE's objective and goal, how to devise specific communication techniques, and how to select the form of media. Besides, the management in the CBE needs more understanding and perception on the PRs campaign.

The finding also implies that PRs Campaign planning requires thorough research to inform messaging strategies, and the segmentation of the general audience into target publics for whom specific messages are tailored. Carefully crafted and effectively framed key messages are an integral element of strategy campaign. However, when excellent public relations is practiced through campaigns, the programs meet the communication objectives, reduces cost of regulation, pressure, and litigation. Unfortunately, CBE's public relations practitioners had not practiced still the PRs campaign when this data was being collected. Likewise, the previous study indicated that PRs campaigns are critical to influencing public or organizational policy, modifying social norms and changing behaviour, raising awareness of issues by facilitating the goal of effective public relations to generate or stimulating conversations about reality and letting those shape perceptions (Sheehan & Turnbull, 2013).

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendation

### 5.1. Conclusion

The findings showed that the PRs practitioners at the HQ of CBE are aware of what the PRs activates entail. The study also identified that they design promotional messages, prepare tools for disseminating service information including media relation. Information dissemination tools they use include (1) main stream media such as TV, radio, newspapers, brochures, magazines, booklet, pamphlets, flyers, posters, exhibitions, organizing events, press conference and press releases, and (2) social media including the CBE's Facebook and website aimed at providing information to the public. However, in terms of role allocation, there are limitations in effective communication, strategic evaluation, and PRs perception.

**Effective communication:** The success of an organizational program depends on the use of effective communication and use of budget. The unit's project budget must be focused on communications to create awareness and understanding of the service in the minds of the public. The study found that the PRs unit at CBE is weak at taking feedback from the news media or electronic and print media for better implementation of PR activities, implying the predominant use of one-way communication. Better and most effective communications are asymmetric and symmetric communication, respectively with the latter respecting mutual interaction. Nevertheless, CBE predominantly uses one-way communication which prioritizes the interest of the message sender that is CBE. This type of relationship can make customers dissatisfied and push them away to cut the relationship with the bank. For example when customers do not discharge their responsibility, the CBE takes measures, but when the CBE does not discharge its responsibilities, the customer does nothing except cutting its relationship with the bank.

**Strategic evaluation:** The evaluation and monitoring of the strategic objectives and activities of the PR is one of the roles of the PR unit. The evaluation focuses on whether the activities are adequately and

effectively planned, how the activities could have been more effective, and how and to what extent the intended CBE objectives are achieved. This gives the opportunity to know the extent of the effectiveness of CBE's service and to improve the delivery of service awareness. It also helps customers and stakeholders to understand and forward feedback on public relations activities.

However, the finding revealed that the PR unit does not set, use, and evaluate its unit's strategic objectives, and the underlying reason is that the PRs practitioners are non-PR professionals. They do not or cannot conduct research to informed decisions.

**Misunderstanding PRs:** Furthermore, public relations practice has been misunderstood, at least to some extent, by CBE public relations unit, implying that PRs was not successfully practised at the CBE. Nevertheless, the study found that the public relations unit of CBE did not have a clear public relations strategy, while giving more attention to the advertising and promotion strategy, indicating that advertising and promotion or marketing strategy is given a high priority and not the public relation strategy. This indicates that there is a misunderstanding at CBE with regards to the role that public relations and strategic communications play in creating service awareness and building institutional image.

In addition to the PRs unit, the management of CBE also has misconception of the profession of PRs. The PRs function is not considered a management function at the CBE. They do not consider PRs a management function which involves planning, organizing, directing the budget of CBE, setting, using, and evaluating achievement of strategic objectives and image building. It seems that they assume the role of PRs practitioners is only crafting and disseminating messages and arranging events, and the role of the unit's head is only attending executive's meeting and managing the unit. The head of the PRs unit is less involved in decision making or may not have a role of decision making at all, and this has contributed to the poor internal Public relations and the performance of the unit itself. Not involving the PR unit's head in a meaning full decision making can also affect the effectiveness of services given to internal and external stakeholders, the relationship of CBE with its potential customers and stakeholders.

**Challenges:** Finally, the study found out that the lack of effective professional skills of PRs practitioners, unrelated field of study with the discipline of public relations, human power turnover and lack of budget had been identified as the challenges of public relations practitioners in creating service awareness and enhancing the image of CBE. The study also found that little has been done by the CBE's PRs practitioners to develop their professional skill.

**Limitation of the study:** This study has not investigated thoroughly strategies CBE uses to create service awareness and image building, customers' perception with regards to maintaining relationship with CBE, CBE services, customer satisfaction, and CBE's image especially in relation to discharging its social responsibilities. We suggest additional studies that investigate the same. Methodologically, this study focused not only in one CBE branch (a case study), but also inclined to qualitative study with limited participants. We suggest a mixed study that can be projected to a larger scale, government and NGO banks.

## 5.2. Recommendations

Based on the major research findings to ensure effective Public Relations practice in the CBE, the study suggested the following recommendations:

1. The PRs unit provides important information for creating service awareness in CBE. Therefore, for a better understanding and expanding valuable and impact full activities in CBE, the top management should know clearly about strategic public relations program that maintains, creates awareness, and establishes acceptable relationship with publics;
2. The PRs unit should ensure effective communication (two-way communications) between the internal and external publics of the CBE and should enhance the quality of message to achieve strategic objectives and goals;
3. CBE should give clearly defined roles to the PRs unit so that they can efficiently accomplish their practices and make them accountable accordingly. The public relations unit and activities should not be combined with any other units functions. This should ensure effectiveness in public relations practice.

4. CBE should create the enabling environment for high performance of public relations. The public relations unit should be equipped with the necessary office equipment and the needed logistics to ensure effective operation;
5. CBE's top management should empower public relations managers to participate in decision making. This is essential because the PR's unit management provides expert advice on how to formulate and communicate the decisions to the relevant publics to achieve the desired results;
6. CBE should put much emphasis on the professional training and necessary academic background in public relations, journalism and communication because this would enables them to perform the distinct strategist role. The public relations officer should be a qualified person with at least a minimum of a second degree with specialization in public relations. This is to ensure the PRs unit in the practice of public relations;
7. CBE should also arrange skill and capacity building training for the CBE's PRs unit practitioners to motivate and equip them with skills required to enhance their performance and productivity.
8. CBE should also take initiatives to promote PRs through identifying gaps, educating and improving practitioners' skill gaps;
9. PRs is an increasingly important service awareness creating and image building tool in banks; therefore, the PRs unit should be given an increased budgetary provision;
10. CBE should increase the size of man power in the head quarter and in all branches level; this enables public relations practitioners to easily create service awareness of the bank and to create effective relationship with customers.

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#### Authors' contribution

- <sup>1</sup> Collected data and wrote the thesis which served as a source of this manuscript.
- <sup>2</sup> Co-advised the candidate, the first author, and commented on the manuscript.
- <sup>3</sup> Corresponding author; Principal advisor, prepared the manuscript, analysed, enriched, and discussed the findings.

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