

COMMUNICATION SKILLS NEEDED BY OPERATORS OF AGRICULTURAL SMALL AND MEDIUM SCALE ENTERPRISES FOR EFFECTIVE PUBLIC RELATIONS IN ENUGU STATE

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Abstract

The study focused on communication skills needed by operators of Agricultural Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (ASMEs) in Enugu State, for effective public relations. The study was guided by three research questions and three hypotheses. The population for the study was 76, made up of 50 males and 26 female managers of registered agricultural small and medium scale enterprises in Enugu State. The entire population was studied because of its manageable size. The instrument for data collection was 21 items questionnaire validated by three experts, one each from Business Education Programme, Agricultural Education Programme and Measurement & Evaluation Unit of Enugu State University of Science and Technology. The reliability of the instrument was determined using Cronbach Alpha which yielded a coefficient of 0.82. Data was collected by the researcher with the help of three assistants selected based on their familiarity with the study area. Mean was used for data analysis and the null hypotheses tested with t-test statistics. The researcher found out that the operators of ASMEs need ability to present oral reports, construct mailable letters and speak the local language among others as communication skills. Based on the findings, it was recommended among other things that the identified communication skills should be utilized by individuals in the ASMEs for effective public relations in the business.

Key words: Agri-business, Operators, Public relations, Communication and Skills.

Introduction

There are many Agricultural small and medium scale enterprises (ASMEs) in Enugu State. The Central Bank of Nigeria (2003), defined Agricultural small and medium scale enterprise as an organisation with labour size of 11-100 workers or a total capital of not more than 50 million naira, including working capital, but excluding cost of land. Agricultural SMEs in Nigeria are divided into three sectors; they are production, processing and sales sectors including wholesales and retails (Fabayo 2009). Agricultural small scale enterprises usually operate in formal and semi-formal sectors. Agricultural small and medium scale enterprises (ASMEs) occupy a place of pride in virtually every country or state because of their significant roles in the development and growth of various economies. The ASMEs are veritable vehicles for the achievement of national economic objectives of employment generation and poverty reduction at low investment cost as well in the development of entrepreneurial capabilities making use of indigenous technology. According to Onugu (2005) other intrinsic benefits of vibrant ASMEs include access to the infrastructural facilities occasioned by their existence in the environment, stimulation of economic activities such as supply of various items and distributive trades for items

produced needed in the country, stemming from rural to urban migration, enhancement of standard of living of the employees, operators and their dependents as well as those directly or indirectly associated with these enterprises. These benefits of ASMEs are achievable if the enterprise operators have good communication skills. There are types of communication skills which include verbal, non-verbal and use of information technology. Communication skills according to Wesley (2005) in Onoh (2014) refers to individual's needed ideas/information and ability to express oneself so that others could understand. It is the ability to effectively discuss with customers, and business associates through oral, written and non-verbal means as well as electronically with no ambiguity on ideas transmitted. Obayi (2009) stated that effective communication is the basic process to all functions which are performed in a system. Communication skills of a business enterprise help to build internal and external relationships. In small and medium enterprises, the basic communication process comprises a message, sender, receiver and medium of exchange, while the sender is required to code the message from the sender using different skills. It therefore means that, certain skills are needed by operators of Agricultural

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small and medium scale enterprises for effective communication. Okeke (2015) opined that the success of agricultural small and medium scale enterprises in contemporary society depends on the communication skills utilized to reach out to customers, through the use of media like voice calls on handsets, what's app, short message service, other social media apps, internet, radio, printed material,

posters and so on. The marketability of agricultural SMEs products and services depends on the communication skills of the operators of agricultural SMEs.

Verbal communication skills are the capability to transfer information orally from one person to another (Obasikene, Agbo, Odo, Okwor &

Ugwuagbo, 2005). Verbal communication skills enable the ASME operators to interact with employees, customers and friends on day to day activities. Non-verbal communication skills refer to the use of signs and written media, such as letters, reports, minutes, articles, abstracts, memoranda, press release and telegrams (Obayi, 2009). Other non-verbal skills such as signs, signals and symbols are used to pass information from one person or organization to another.

In addition to non-verbal communications are electronic communication skills which are information and communication technology skills. Information and communication technology according to Okorafor (2011) is the use of computer systems, telecommunication systems, multimedia, networked and standalone plus hardware and software which can facilitate the achievement of goals. Information and communication technology skills could be inform of electronic mails, social media and internet. These skills can help ASME operators to secure loan, advertise and even market his product internationally. Information and communication technology skills focus on the ability to use computers, ancillary equipment, and software and internet media in transmission of information from one person or organization to another.

Communication skills are very important in public relations in agricultural education. It is only through effective communication that the primary managerial functions of planning, organizing, staffing, directing and controlling can be achieved and the goals of the agricultural organization met. According to Onoh (2014) communication is the process by which people exchange information, thoughts

and feelings. It is a means through which agricultural small and medium enterprises can be managed. Marian (2015) opined that management of small medium scale enterprises requires effective communication skills by the operators.

These communication skills would enable the ASMEs to interact with government, community and other factors that might challenge its existence. It is said that information is knowledge and knowledge is power but cannot stand without effective communication system. Communication skills in managing ASMEs play a very important role as it can control other managerial functions of an organization. In Enugu State, there are many Agricultural small and medium scale enterprises located in the six agricultural zones: Agbani, Awgu, Enugu, EnuguEzike, Nsukka and Udi in the State.

It is worrisome that despite the incentives, policies, programmes and support aimed at revamping Agribusiness and the SMEs in the State, they have performed rather below expectation. It is estimated that the life span of most agricultural small and medium scale enterprises in the State is five years. Some people argue that it is due to lack of managerial skills. Eze (2009) noted that it is communication skill gap that is hindering the growth of ASMEs especially in rural areas. The use of verbal, non verbal communication, information and technology are very important and necessary for achievement of ASME's objectives but most of these enterprises find it difficult to communicate effectively. Non possession of needed communication skills affect the growth of ASMEs in Enugu State and in consonance with Okeke (2015), many ASMEs have collapsed

resulting from inability to communicate effectively.

Different people, organisations and operators have advanced various reasons as to why ASMEs have not been able to live up to their billing. While an average operator would always hinge his failure on lack of access to finance, some others thing otherwise arguing that inappropriate managerial skills, difficulty in accessing global market, lack of entrepreneurial skills, lack of communication skills and poor infrastructure are largely responsible (Eze, 2006). While some of these challenges faced by ASMEs are included by the operating environment, others challenges are driven by the inherent characteristics of the ASMEs operators themselves.

The research finding by Okeke (2015) indicated that lack of communication skills hinder the growth of ASMEs and in some cases lead to the collapse of many of these enterprises. The researcher wonders why many of these Agricultural small and medium scale enterprise operators lack communication skills for effective planning, controlling, organizing, directing and coordinating the functions in their small and medium scale enterprises. Therefore, the problem of this study is put in question form as what are the communication skills needed by operators of Agricultural small and medium scale enterprises for effective public relations in Enugu State. This study emerged in order to provide relevant answers to the question. Specifically the study sought to determine:

1. The verbal communication skills needed by operators of ASMEs for the effective public relations in Enugu State.

2. The non-verbal communication skills needed by the operators of ASMEs for the effective public relations in Enugu State.
3. The electronic communication skills needed by the operators of ASMEs for the effective public relations in Enugu State.

Tested hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance.

1. There is no significant different in the mean ratings of the opinion of male and female ASMES operators on the verbal communication skills needed for effective public relations in Enugu State.
2. There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of the opinions of male and female ASMEs operators on the non-verbal communication skills needed for the effective public relations in Enugu State.
3. There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of the opinions of male and female ASMEs operators on the electronic communication skills needed for the effective public relations in Enugu State.

Methods

The study adopted a survey research design and was carried out in Enugu State. The population for the study was 76 made up of 50 males and 26 female operators of agricultural small and medium scale enterprises called commodity interest groups in Enugu State (field survey 2018). There was no sampling due to the manageable size of the population. The instrument used for data collection was a 21 items structured questionnaire developed by the researcher from the extensive literature reviewed for the study. The instrument was structured on four point response options of

Table 1: Mean ratings with standard deviation of responses of male and female ASMEs operators on the verbal communication skills needed for the effective public relations in Enugu State.

S/N	Verbal communication skills needed include	N=50		Female N=26		Overall		Decision
		\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD	
1	Ability to speak eloquently	3.21	0.81	3.19	0.79	3.20	0.80	HN
2	Ability to speak English	3.14	0.87	3.06	0.97	3.10	0.92	HN
3	Ability to speak local language	3.22	0.92	3.08	0.88	3.15	0.90	HN
4	Ability to present report orally	3.15	0.79	3.45	0.63	3.30	0.71	HN
5	Ability to make voice call using telephone	3.13	0.73	3.19	0.80	3.16	0.77	HN
6	Ability to hold interview and meetings	3.41	1.02	3.06	0.97	3.24	1.00	HN
7	Ability to conduct oral briefing face to face	3.08	0.90	2.95	0.85	3.02	0.88	HN
	Grand Mean /Std Dev	3.19	0.86	3.13	0.84	3.18	0.85	HN

Very Highly Needed (VHN), Highly Needed (HN), Slightly Needed (SN) and not Needed (NN) with numerical values of 4,3,2 and 1 respectively. The instrument was validated by three experts from the Department of Technology and Vocational Education, Enugu State University of Science and Technology, Enugu. The reliability of the instrument was determined using Cronbach Alpha which yielded a coefficient index of 0.82. The copies of the questionnaire were distributed to 76 respondents in their working offices with the help of four assistants familiar with the environment. The copies of the questionnaire were retrieved immediately after completion and this resulted to 100% return rate. Mean was used to answer the research questions while t-test statistics was used to test the null hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance. To take decision on the needed items, true limit of numbers was assigned to response options as follows: Very highly needed (VHN) 3.50 – 4.00; Highly needed (HN) 2.50-4.49; Slightly needed (SN) 1.50-2.49; Not needed (NN) 1.00-1.49. Therefore any item with a mean value of 1.50 or above was needed and not needed if below 1.50. The null

hypothesis of no significant difference was accepted for any item with a value greater than 0.05 but not upheld if below 0.05.

Results

The result of the study was based on the research questions answered and null hypothesis tested and presented on Tables 1-6.

Research question 1

What are the verbal communication skills needed by operators of ASMEs for effective public relations in Enugu State?

The result of data analysis showed that the mean rating of the respondents responses ranged from 3.02 to 3.30 indicating highly needed. This means that the itemized verbal communication skills are highly needed by the operators of ASMEs for the effective public relations in Enugu State. The overall grand mean of 3.18 further validated that. The standard deviation of 0.85 indicates that the

respondents had consensus opinion skills needed for the effective public relations in to their responses. Enugu State.

Hypothesis 1

There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of the opinions of male and female ASMEs operators on the verbal communication

Table 2: T-test statistics on the mean rating of the responses of male and female ASMEs operators on the verbal communication skills needed for effective public relations in Enugu State.

Gender	X	SD	N	df	P	t-cal	t-tab	Decision
Male	3.19	0.86	50	74	0.05	0.32	1.98	NS
Female	3.13	0.84	26					

Table 2 presents a t-test analysis which shows that the t-calculated value at 0.05 level of significance and 74 degree of freedom is 0.32, while the t-table value is 1.98. Since the t-table value is more than the t-calculated value, the null hypothesis is therefore not significant for the seven items. This implies that there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of male and female ASMEs operators on their responses to the items as the verbal communication skills needed for effective public relations in Enugu State.

Research question 2

What are the non-verbal communication skills needed by the operators of ASMEs for the effective public relations in Enugu State?

Table 3: Mean ratings with standard deviation of male and females ASMEs operators responses on the non- verbal communication skills needed for the effective public relations in Enugu State.

S/N	Non-Verbal communication skills needed include	Male N=50		Female N=26		Overall		Decision
		\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD	
8	Ability to construct mailable letter	3.45	0.86	3.22	0.61	3.19	3.74	HN
9	Ability to handle confidential matters	3.18	0.81	3.16	0.80	3.15	0.80	HN
10	Ability to communicate using gestures	3.11	0.89	2.89	0.93	3.00	0.91	HN
11	Ability to communicate using signs	3.33	0.76	3.02	0.74	3.18	0.75	HN
12	Ability to understand symbols	3.09	0.83	3.39	0.79	3.24	0.81	HN
13	Ability to use the senses in communication	2.87	0.91	2.98	0.93	2.93	0.92	HN
Grand/Standard Deviation		3.17	0.85	3.13	0.80	3.12	0.82	HN

Table 4: t-test statistic on the mean ratings of the opinion of male and female ASMEs operators on the non-verbal communication skills needed for the effective public relations in Enugu State.

Gender	X	SD	N	df	P	t-cal	t-tab	Decision
Male	3.197	0.83	50	74	0.05	0.215	1.984	NS
Female	3.13	0.84	26					

The result of data analysis presented in table 3 shows that the mean ratings for the items ranged from 2.93 to 3.24 indicating highly needed. This shows that the itemized non verbal communication skills are highly needed by the operators of ASMEs for the effective public relations in Enugu State. The overall grand mean of 3.12 further attest to that. The low grand standard deviation of 0.82 shows that the respondents' opinions are homogenous and also validates the mean.

The result of t-test analysis shows that the t-calculated value at 0.05 level of significance is 0.215 while the t-table value is 1.984 at 74

Hypothesis 2

There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of the opinions of male and female ASMEs operators on the non-verbal communication skills needed for the effective public relations in Enugu State.

degree of freedom. Since the t-calculated is less than the t-table value, the null hypothesis is not significant. Therefore, there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of male

and female ASME operators responses on communication skills needed for the effective public relations in Enugu State.

the items are the electronic communication skills needed the operators agricultural small and medium scale enterprises for the effective public relation in Enugu State. The grand mean of 3.24 attests to that. The low standard

deviation of 0.80 indicates that the respondents' opinions did not differ remarkably.

Research Question 3

What are the electronic communication skills needed by the operators of ASMEs for the effective public relations in Enugu State?

Hypothesis 3

Table 5: Mean ratings with standard deviation of male and female ASMEs operators responses on the electronic communication skills needed for the effective public relations in Enugu State.

S/N	Verbal communication skills needed include	Male N=50		Female N=26		Overall		Decision
		̄	SD	̄	SD	̄	SD	
14	Ability to communicate using the social media	3.37	0.80	3.09	0.83	3.23	0.82	HN
15	Ability to use the internet services in communication	3.35	0.75	3.24	0.80	3.30	0.78	HN
16	Ability to edit document electronically	3.29	0.73	3.24	0.72	3.27	0.73	HN
17	Ability to mail documents to receivers using electronic device	3.26	0.78	3.15	0.85	3.21	0.81	HN
18	Ability to use computer programme in communicating	3.11	0.84	3.48	0.66	3.30	0.75	HN
19	Ability to downlaod information from e-mail	3.38	0.70	3.23	0.76	3.31	0.73	HN
20	Ability to send document to the mail	3.41	0.83	3.10	0.94	3.26	0.89	HN
21	Ability to type information in computer before sending	3.10	0.88	3.94	0.92	3.02	0.90	HN
	Grand/Standard Deviation	3.28	0.79	3.18	0.81	3.24	0.80	HN

The result of statistical analysis presented in table 5 above reveals that the overall mean ratings of the respondents ranged from 3.02 to 3.31 indicating highly needed. This implies that

There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of the opinions of male and female ASMEs operators on the electronic communication skills needed for the effective

Table 6: t-test analysis of the mean ratings of the responses of male and female ASMEs operators on the electronic communication skills needed for the effective public relations in Enugu State.

Gender	\bar{x}	SD	N	df	P	t-cal	t-tab	Decision
Male	3.28	0.79	50	74	0.05	0.5435	1.984	NS
Female	3.18	0.81	26					

public relations in Enugu State.

The result of t-test statistical analysis shows that the value of t-calculated at 0.05 level of significance and 74 degree of freedom is 0.5435 while the t-table value is 1.984. Since the t-cal is less than the t-table value, the null hypotheses is therefore not significant for these items. This means that gender of the respondents have no significant influence in their responses to the items.

Discussion of findings of the study The findings of the study according to the research question one showed that the verbal communication skills itemized are highly needed for the management of ASMEs as regards public relations in Enugu State.

Some of the verbal communication skills identified include ability to speak eloquently, speak English, speak local language, present report orally, make voice call using telephone, hold interview and meeting and conduct oral briefing face to face. The findings of the study showed that eloquent in speech and ability to speak English and local languages of the people are needed in the effective public relations for success in ASMEs in Enugu State. The findings are supported by Okeke (2015) who noted that ability to speak eloquently and hold interview and meeting are needed by ASME operators to effectively manage a business. This shows that the identified verbal communication skills are needed for management of ASMEs in Enugu State. The result of null hypothesis tested indicated that there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of the opinions of male and female SME operators in the verbal communication skills for effective public relations for ASMEs. The implication of this is that gender has no influence on the responses to the itemized verbal communication skills.

The findings of the study on research question two showed that the respondents accepted that the items enumerated as non-verbal communication skills are highly needed. The non-verbal communication skills identified for managing ASMEs include ability to construct mailable letter, gestures, sign, and symbols and use the senses in communicating. The findings showed that non verbal communication skills are highly needed for effective public relations for ASMEs in Enugu State. The findings of the study was in agreement with Obayi (2009) who stated that non verbal communication like use of symbols, signs and gestures are necessary for effective organizational management. The null hypothesis tested showed that there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of the opinions of male and female SME operators on the non-verbal communication skills for the management of ASMEs in Enugu State. The result of the study depicts that gender has no influence on the responses of the respondents.

The findings of the study with respect to research question three indicated that the itemized electronic communication skills are highly needed for the effective public relations regarding ASMEs in Enugu State. The electronic communication skills include ability to communicate using social media, ability to edit document electronically, ability to mail documents to receivers using electronic devices, ability to use computer programme in communicating, ability to download information from e-mails and

document to the mail, and the ability to type information in computer before sending. The findings indicated that electronic communication skills for the management of ASMEs in Enugu State. The result of the study is supported by Eze (2009) who opined that using electronic communication system like e-mail, social media and ICT facilities are needed for effective management in contemporary society. This collaborated with the opinion of Okorafor (2011), who stated that the use of computer systems, telecommunication systems, multimedia, networked and standalone plus hardware and software can facilitate the achievement of effective public relations and goals. This means that electronic communication skills are highly needed by ASMEs operator to effectively manage their businesses in Enugu State. The null hypothesis tested showed that there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of the opinions of male and female SMEs operators on the electronic communication skills needed for the effective public relations as well as management of ASMEs in Enugu State.

Conclusion

Communication helps in management of day to day business transaction which could be communicated verbally, non verbal and electronically. The findings of the study showed that the identified communication skills are highly needed for effective management of ASMEs in Enugu State. The identified communication skills would help in training ASMEs operators in entrepreneurship so that their communication skills will meet the demand of the society. Electronic communication skills centered on ICT and computer facilitates are needed in ASMEs as every sector of the economy is going digital.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made;

1. The use of signs, symbols and gesture should be part of the communication skills which ASMEs operators must acquire for the management of ASMEs in their areas.
2. ASMEs operators should learn electronic communication skills to enable them to sustainably grow in business in Enugu State.
3. The identified communication skills should be part of the public relations in Agricultural Education curriculum to enable recipient to develop their communication skills for successful enterprise.

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