

Public Relations and ICT: A sociography of uses in the oil sector in Cameroon

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Abstract

Our society was invaded by the Internet hurricane a few years ago and since then; it has continued to induce developments in the various sectors of activity. We wanted to understand how new media influence Public Relations in the oil sector, by studying Total Cameroon companies. We cannot pretend to have a complete overview of the question, but all the same try to detect pre-internet behaviors, and Public Relations seen through this meta media. Give a better image of the company, win new customers, anticipate possible crises. These are some of the objectives of Public Relations that our companies highlight by using this art of doing that is Public Relations. Considering a social component in a company without Public Relations is almost impossible these days. Therefore, arming oneself in the best way is to use new media effectively. We have from social constructivism and the theory of uses, on the theoretical level to analyze our subject, and on the methodological level, it seemed essential to us to summon a qualitative-quantitative approach. The results that have reached us are as follows: Total Cameroon, makes good use of Public Relations to improve their visibility, even if this use seems insufficient to us, from this point of view, this company would benefit more from deepening its contribution on the charitable and social side. Improving their image would take on a greater dimension in our country if it expanded their partnerships with national universities, as is the case with universities in the north. Ethnicization and all-out family management at Bocom Petroluem constitute one of the major obstacles in the proper deployment of Public Relations in this company, which would benefit from decentralizing the circle of decisions and empowering its workers beyond ethnicity and family.

Keywords: Public Relations, New media, oil sector

Introduction

Society as we know it today has undergone many changes with the advent of different technologies. Man will therefore go from prehistory to history with this creation, since he can then communicate using documents. Over the centuries, it

will multiply its capacity to acquire information, but also to transmit it, in particular with the creation of paper. The advent of the printing press will also revolutionize the society in which we live, just like gunpowder, the railways, the compass, the microscope, the internet, etc. The latter,

whose importance is still not definitively quantifiable, is currently one of the most important technologies developed.

Like other fields of activity, Public Relations has not been spared the influence of this revolutionary technology. The changes they have undergone both in their tools and in their deployment clearly show serious changes. Formerly used by Ivy Lee to clarify the economic situation of American businessmen, or by Edward Bernays to popularize the consumption of cigarettes by women in public, Public Relations is nowadays an indispensable, even essential, tool for professionals in many industries.

Our study, which chooses the distribution sector of petroleum sector products in Cameroon, will specifically target an international company that has been established since independence. Even though the advent of new technologies such as the Internet widens the fields and methods of communication and information dissemination, we do not have the feeling that this sector, which has long remained far from competition, has benefited from it. in the accomplishment of its missions

The very distant concept of Public Relations, but still commonly used today, has changed over time. "In the social world, which is itself already constructed by words, symbols and behaviors, the practice of public relations is largely focused on the creation of symbols and messages, as well as on the management of relationships between multiple stakeholders".¹

At the same time, from a theoretical perspective, the social role of this concept must be highlighted. this is explained by the fact that "The development of an organization depends very much on the perception of its stakeholders and various audiences"². And, on the other hand, on the claim of practitioners to take the public interest into account. consideration in their practice. Thus described, Public Relations can be executed in four distinct ways, namely: by a monologue or even persuasion, a dialogue, an asymmetrical communication, and a two-way communication. Although these models are all still in use, the most contemporary and recommended is the two-way model.

Problem

Public Relations, as well as all sectors of activity, have undergone profound changes since the advent of internet technology. This meta-media, as it is called to signify the impact of the changes it brings in the ways of doing and acting, has renewed the practice and offered hitherto unknown tools.

So do we ask ourselves the questions of how companies in the oil sector, in particular Total Cameroon, use the internet tool for their public relations?

- How does Total Cameroon operate on a daily basis since the advent of new media, in other words what techniques and tools are used?
- Does it take these media into account and use them effectively?

Methodological Framework

The field and the corpus

We chose the company Total Cameroon because it is one of the most represented on the national territory and the city of Douala as a testing ground. Douala, it should be remembered, is the economic showcase of the country and one of the entry and exit doors. At the same time, it is the second most populated city, which makes it a miniaturized representation of the national space.

Our surveys were carried out both at distribution points (sales stations) and at the Structure Department. Back and forth that allowed us to gather testimonials from customers, consumers, at the same time as observing the practices related to the implementation of R.P. A collection which is summarized in the tables below.

Total Cameroon and ICT uses

- The tools used by the various departments of Total Cameroon are numerous and diverse.

Tools	Executive management	Station-Service
Facebook	Frequent	Frequent
Twitter	Intermediate	Non-existent
Whatsapp	Frequent	Frequent
Youtube	Frequent	Non-existent
Instagram	Intermediate	Non-existent

¹ Berger, P.L. et Al (1966). La construction sociale de la réalité, un ouvrage de la sociologie de la connaissance, Garden City, NY: Livres Anchor, 240 p.

² Maisonneuve, O., J.-F. Lamarche et Y. St-Amand. (2006). Les relations publiques dans une société en mouvance. Sainte-Foy: Presses de l'Université du Québec, p. 9.

Source: Author

This table allows us to specify in a first draft that all the networks listed are used in the various departments of the company concerned for service needs. In a second movement, it should be noted that these tools are present in the various departments of the company, even if they are not uniformly used there.

In addition, we believe that depending on the sensitivity of the atmosphere, in service stations, it is less appropriate to use devices that emit ³electrostatic waves. Our

interviewees in the field revealed to us that these different networks are used in their offices, which limits the risk of accidents in the marginal sphere.

However, the analysis of uses is not limited to the tools, it goes beyond to also highlight other parameters such as the age of those who use them.

- the tools used and their frequency of use depend on age

Age range / Work center	Under 30	Between 30 and 50 years old	Between 50 and 70 years old
Executive management	32%	52%	16%
Station - services	20%	68%	12%

Source: Author

Of course, we relied on seniority, position of responsibility and physical condition, with a margin of error to highlight the age groups.

The first observation that we can make is that the average age at Total Cameroon, whether in General Management or in service stations, varies between 30 and 50 years⁴. This population interests us in several ways. And as many other studies have revealed, young employees are those who use it the most. This habituation to the communication tools by this age group used by Total

Cameroon makes its customer relationship effective and permanent.

According to the testimonies of the 50-70-year-old employees of Total Cameroon, they do not find an interest in the use of these new means of communication, because they say; "We worked for a long time without that".

- the link between Internet use and the level of training of employees.

Workplace / Level of education	Executive management	Station - services
Primary	7%	8%
Secondary	10%	32%
Superior	83%	60%

Source: Author

These statistics tell us about the intellectual composition of the staff. At the Directorate, the staff is mostly made up of employees with a university education. This composition is linked to the sensitivity of the tasks to be performed which require very in-depth and specialized training in the oil, managerial, security and communication fields, etc.

Therefore, it is imperative from a professional point of view that the staff is profitable for the company. At this level

we find that the acceptance and use of new media was quite easy, given the fact that this staff is more seasoned and understands the profitability of using new media in a digitalized society. In petrol stations, the staff is just as trained as in management, even if it is to a lesser extent. This explains why they have adopted new media as a means of communication, both internally and externally. The management of the most sensitive personnel and tasks is

³ <https://www.science-et-vie.com/archives/d-ou-vient-l-interdiction-de-telephoner-dans-les-stations-service-36632>, le 08-02-2019 à 11hrs22.

⁴ L'Auteur.

delegated to the most trained and experienced employees in this area. In the opinion of the personnel interviewed in the field⁵, this choice militates in favor of the good use of new media by the personnel, insofar as it is the experience and the training that the chief employees have acquired,

which makes it possible to instil in others the use of these new means of communication.

- the tools used and their degree of use also depend on gender

Workplace Gender	Executive management	Station – services
Male	60%	40%
Feminine	55%	35%

Source: Author

⁶Over the past 10 years, much research has been devoted to gender disparities in ICT professions. ⁷Some works have focused on education and training, highlighting the gendered representations of IT and their impact on school and academic orientations. Other research has focused on the world of work. They took into consideration the employment and working conditions of women, careers, the balance between work and private life. Our field results have not departed from tradition.

First on board, the presence of women in a minority in General Management is backed by the fact that work in oil companies like Total Cameroon is divided into two movements. The first, which boils down to administrative tasks and whose responsibility is to ensure archiving, orders, inventory and personnel management, among others, does not require manual input. But the aspect that we want to bring out here is not that of justifying the presence of ladies in General Management, but that of understanding the efficiency and performance of the staff at this workstation. In the opinion of the assistant to the communication officer, the Public Relations policy of the Total Cameroon Douala subsidiary is driven by the large Total group, which has its headquarters in the capital Yaoundé. We can glimpse here a conception of politics and the use of new media by men, even if its application in the field is done by both genders.

Public Relations as A Technique for Bringing People Together

To set up in a locality, you have to get closer to these populations. The new communication tools have facilitated the implementation of Public Relations at Total Cameroon and enabled them to get local populations to adhere to their causes. The territorial development that followed is only a logical consequence of the good use of Public Relations by the specialists of this company.

It is therefore obvious that Public Relations participate, as some of the authors have already said, in bringing companies and populations closer together through the use of new communication tools.

⁸The contribution of new information and communication technologies to development processes and territorial dynamics is today at the center of many debates, both with regard to the control of information and the reduction of spatial distances that it would allow. The nature of the arguments put forward largely depends on the proposed interpretation schemes and the underlying hypotheses on the development process and more generally the interrelationships between the technical and the social.

⁹However, beyond disappointments and even partial failures, ICTs continue to arouse increased interest among local authorities, reminding us of the power of seduction they can have on elected officials”.

This is reflected in the daily work at Total Cameroon, although we are talking here about institutional communication instead of public relations.

⁵ Interview with the manager and head of the Total 'Président' service station at the Akwa Pharmacy crossroads in Douala, Friday, October 5, at 11 a.m. 30 minutes

⁶ Valenduc G (2011), "Life cycles and careers in ICT professions: a gender perspective", *tic & société* [Online], Vol. 5, n° 1, Online since 27 May 2019, connection on 14 August 2019. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ticetsociete/939>; DOI: 10.4000/ticetsociete.939

⁷ Collet I. (2011), "Gender effect; the paradox of computer studies", *tic & société* [Online], Vol. 5, No. 1 | 2011, posted on October 5, 2011,

consulted on October 30, 2019. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ticetsociete/955>; DOI: 10.4000/ticetsociete.955.

⁸ Bertrand N. (2001), in *Information and communication technologies: what role in the territorial dynamics of development?* *Revue d'Economie Régionale & Urbaine*, 2001/1 (February), p. 135-152. DOI: 10.3917/reru.011.0135. URL: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-d-economie-regionale-et-urbaine-2001-1-page-135.htm>.

⁹ Eveno S., (1999), in *Local development on ICT does not exist, we have encountered it*, *Local Authorities*, no 41, II, pp.58-66.

¹⁰*The public relations policy is established by the Total group, which does not expect anything from Total Cameroon, which is only a subsidiary. The head of the institutional policy and sustainable development department is posted in Yaoundé, and his tasks are not established beforehand. They are ad hoc depending on the events or cases to be managed. At Total, this department is called institutional policy and sustainable development. Sustainable development allows us to manage the hydrocarbon section, which aims to be sustainable, which contributes to the environmental balance of society. Among other things, institutional communication intervenes in public relations, i.e. in external communication; sponsorship, patronage and even internal communication. We propose a communication policy in compliance with that enacted by the large Total group."*

Public Relations for Two-Fold Communication.

¹¹*"The most important thing in communication is to hear what is not said", underlined Peter Drucker. Total seems, in view of our fieldwork, to have endorsed this declaration. It is clear that behind the action of this company there is an unacknowledged and unsuspected goal: to create affection around a communication that is supposed to sell. They thus succeed in creating the link between the commercial aspect of the communication and the unsuspected sympathy that they want to create in the consumer. Through one of their latest products called Total Excelium with which they talk about the benefits of the latter for the consumer's engine, total succeeds, for example, in arousing sympathy among the consumer. Our interlocutor expresses himself as follows:*

¹²*"... With less pollution, necessarily reduced greenhouse gases. We have a healthier environment, the motorist sees his consumption drop, his engine takes longer. Total by this kind of communication encourages the purchase, but also creates sympathy with the populations."*

The same manager did not fail to point out the effectiveness of their communication with customers when she specifies that:

¹³*Today there is a testimonial communication on customers satisfied with the Excelium product, which Total relayed on social networks. There are consumers who recount their adventure for some time with the product and who give their opinions on it. Our objective, among other things, is to create*

emotional capital, something that is not easy as a French company setting up in an African country. This is why we have chosen only Cameroonian people, who wear local colors to have the opinion of the region."

In the light of what has just been said, we perceive that in its practice of Public Relations, Total wants to contextualize the communication by using the local elements and the actors to create an affective capital in order to have a certain attraction of sympathy from the populations by integrating directly into the practices, habits and customs of the land.

This is why, for example, this manager says that in some of their advertisements they use people authorized in local colors.

Our interlocutor, in the same wake specifies the difficulties are however numerous:

¹⁴*"With some of our products we have tried to communicate without necessarily creating sympathy capital. This communication is different from institutional communication which seeks, for example, to make known the business of the company, insofar as the latter aims to make known the actions undertaken by Total to support unemployed young people. This communication on business professions is also well established and is the subject of a structured project on paper, but which has never been implemented."*

We must note that even if this project has not yet seen the light of day in a concrete way, there are nevertheless alternatives in the sense of playing the same role and making the company welcoming, attractive and friendly. She clarifies this by saying that:

¹⁵*"Our communication on Public Relations projects leads us to communicate, either at the launch of the project, or some time before, using the various communication media that exist, what we call in the jargon a 360-degree communication. Total's participation in sponsorships, fairs or the employment crossroads, for example, allows it to speak out and inform its audiences about its projects. here a real success. Many people come to discover and come out of it quite informed about how to have a good profile for the job, how to set up and manage your business, etc. It is really an effective side on which we achieve a strong positioning in a competitive society. We also have other sponsorships that contribute to the development of the country, for example SAPEF, which is*

¹⁰ Interview with Mrs. Prisca BIADAM, assistant to the communication officer at Total Cameroon Douala, Monday October 1, 2018, at 3 p.m., at the direction of Total Cameroon opposite Pharmacie du center in Akwa.

¹¹ Peter Drucker (1957), *The Practice of Business Management*, The Organizational Issues.

¹² Interview with Ms. Prisca BIADAM, assistant to the communication officer at Total Cameroon Douala, Monday, October 01, 2018, at 3 p.m., at the management of Total Cameroon opposite Pharmacie du center in Akwa.

¹³ Interview with Ms. Prisca BIADAM, assistant to the communication officer at Total Cameroon Douala, Monday, October 01, 2018, at 3 p.m.,

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¹⁴ Interview with Ms. Prisca BIADAM, assistant to the communication officer at Total Cameroon Douala, Monday, October 01, 2018, at 3 p.m., at the management of Total Cameroon opposite Pharmacie du center in Akwa.

¹⁵ Interview with Mrs. Prisca BIADAM, assistant to the communication officer at Total Cameroon Douala, Monday October 01, 2018, at 3 p.m., at the direction of Total Cameroon opposite Pharmacie du center in Akwa.

managed by the IFC, one of our partners. At the same time, we have programs like the Startupper Challenge¹⁶, which are programs to encourage young people not to be discouraged, to believe in their dreams, in their projects and also to benefit from support or even coaching in their businesses.”

The executive thus takes stock of the communication activity by presenting us with a project in which Total is a partner called the Young Graduate Program, through which they assist job seekers and students.

“¹⁷The Young Graduate Program which is a program through which we invite all young people aged 25, who have studied technical, management, management, and who have Bac + 5 level to submit their CVs on the site, and after studies, they are selected from our partner schools. It does not necessarily guarantee a job, but it gives access to the professional environment and it opens the doors for future employment. This program gives access to six months of internship in the Total subsidiary of the country where you are, after which the person concerned has three months of studies of his file at the level of human resources to know his morality, following which the person concerned benefits a 12-month internship in another subsidiary outside the country and if deemed satisfactory, he is hired. This is another way for Total to participate in the country's education sector.”

Total deploys creatively through purchase and attention-grabbing incentives. His objectives, which include attracting new customers and retaining those they have already acquired, push him to imagine sensible communications to sell and be courteous, when there is a hidden objective. This kind of communication is set up for the launch of certain projects, when festival or school periods approach, as our respondent tells us:

“¹⁸We use all means of communication, but each communication adapts to our strategy. Posters, radio, print media, internet television are used. We also communicate through non-media, with the street marketing that we used for the launch of Total Excelium, or when opening the electronic distributor in our service stations. On this occasion there was also the distribution of flyers to inform about the stations which were already part of this network. When launching the croissantries in our service stations, we also used street marketing to inform about the concept of the croissanterie.”

¹⁶ <https://kamerpower.com/fr/total-challenge-startupper-de-annee-par-total-startup/>

¹⁷ <http://www.total.cm/pro/apropos-pro/responsabilite-societale/young-graduate-progam.html>

¹⁸ Interview with Mrs. Prisca BIADAM, assistant to the communication officer at Total Cameroon Douala, Monday, October 01, 2018, at 3 p.m., at the management of Total Cameroon opposite Pharmacie du center in AKWA.

During our visits to the various service stations, we encountered the same discourse as that given to us by the head of communication at the Management. This clearly demonstrates traceability in communication approaches and operations.

The managers of the various service stations in which we went down confirmed the words of the assistant to the communication officer as specified by the agent in the field:

“¹⁹We follow training on how to approach customers, how to interact with them, because there are some who are belligerent, who enter the store and must be oriented. There is no special school where you learn this process. For example, we are strictly forbidden to react even when we are insulted by a client. Courtesy is strongly recommended to us because we represent a brand. This training is imperative for all staff both in store and on the track or in store. We are all sellers, so you have to be able to be kind to the customer so that he consumes and wants him to come back”

The main idea that emerges from the head of the station is that Public Relations at Total are mercantile and work for the sale and the realization of profit.

The extension of this thought can be found in the words of the head of the Total station facing the direction of Orange Cameroon, who affirms about their training:

“²⁰We receive training on how to welcome customers, if for example a customer enters the store and wants to buy a chocolate bar, they are offered a packet of peanuts for the children. Although there is not initially this idea, the suggestion can allow him to go to the act of purchase.”

This assertion leads to the idea that Public Relations at Total Cameroon are essentially aggressive insofar as the company also uses the emotional side, affective to push the customer to the act of purchase. Here the use of the image of the child is perfectly illustrative.

“²¹If a customer comes to consume fuel, we ask them if we can check under their hood for the oil level and such. Even if he does not correct the remarks made by the gas station attendant right away, at least he leaves there knowing what is missing in his vehicle. We often suggest cleaning the windshield. These steps are intended to encourage the customer to return to Total, because he will know that at Total we care about his well-being.

In the store, the staff welcomes the customer with a hello (the name of the shops in the gas stations) and a big smile

¹⁹ Interview with the manager and head of the Total 'Président' service station at the Akwa Pharmacy crossroads in Douala, Friday, October 05, 2018, at 11 a.m. 30 minutes.

²⁰ Interview with the manager and head of the Total service station opposite Orange Cameroon located in Douala, Friday, October 05, 2018, at 12:00 p.m. and 3:00 a.m.

²¹ Interview with the manager and head of the Total service station opposite Orange Cameroon located in Douala, Friday, October 05, 2018, at 12:00 p.m. and 3:00 a.m.

that accompanies them throughout their purchases. When he finishes we say thank you and we hope to see him again very soon. All these expressions of politeness are methods of communication to retain and acquire new customers. Also for customers who need change we give it to them every time and even if one day it happens that we don't have any, the customer will not be angry because he knows that we usually give him some."

Given that Total communicates openly about its products and services, we would expect it to do so for all other things that concern it. This is not the case, because it makes less noise when it comes to the humanitarian actions it carries out for the needy, the destitute, the injured. Because for her, it is not good to flaunt the pain of others.

Conclusion

Returning from this company, we realize that it is truly focused on Public Relations. It uses the means at its disposal to get people talking about it and attract the sympathy of consumers. It's very first challenge as an international company was to establish itself and conquer this new market that was offered to it. Total Cameroon has succeeded through its communication skills in winning the oil industry market in Cameroon. It is clear that its success and its maintenance at the highest peak of such a competitive sector comes from its availability, and therefore its attachment to the public. Through the use of different communication media, more specifically, new media, this company has made itself known, loved, and sought to attract the favor of new targets. Moreover, the fact that it has tied in with new media to expand its target leads us to understand that it is proactive. She uses her staff, highly qualified and from different backgrounds to better deploy and develop Public Relations in its structure. Thanks to its multiple campaigns, it succeeds in reaching consumers and target audiences, but also job seekers, shareholders, partners, etc. She uses the internet and related tools effectively to do her Public Relations, and so far with the testimonial communications from satisfied customers, we can say that she is in the process of success and maintenance thanks to these tools.

However, there are still areas and points to review to further sell its image. Charitable actions are one of the points on which Total can be talked about. She wishes to remain anonymous in tragic circumstances, even though communicating about her actions would amount to arousing sympathy for her image. With regard to awareness and partnership programs with universities, Total could set up exchanges with local universities to win over young people who are enrolled there and who find themselves somewhat sidelined. It is true that this project is already in place with international universities.

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