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MOTIVATION AS A PUBLIC RELATIONS TOOL IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY TO GAIN RELIGIOUS STAKEHOLDER BUY-IN

Andee Iheme

Abstract

Public relations can be described as the use of persuasive communication to generate mutual understanding, trust and goodwill between corporate organisations or any group of persons and its stakeholders. Persuasive communication becomes very efficacious if the stakeholder can identify benefits that are accruable to him if he aligns with the requirements of the communication. These benefits could be described as the motivation to act. Motivation refers to the internal and external factors that compel individuals to take action. Intrinsic motivation comes from within and is driven by inherent satisfaction, enjoyment or interest in an activity. Extrinsic motivation is external and comes from outside consequences or rewards associated with the activity (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Faith-based organisations (FBOs) can leverage both intrinsic motivators, such as fulfilled life on earth and extrinsic motivators, such as the assurance of eternal life in heaven for adherents. The Bible is replete with such a communication strategy.

Keywords: Motivation, Public Relations, Christian Theology, Religion

Introduction

Motivating and persuading followers has always been a core aim of religious public relations and communications. Looking at Christian theology, we can see numerous examples of how promises of extrinsic rewards and appeals to intrinsic needs have been used to garner stakeholder buy-in and commitment to the faith. This paper examines three biblical cases where motivation was leveraged to achieve religious goals.

i. Motivating David to Fight Goliath (1 Samuel 17)

The familiar story of David and Goliath illustrates how the promise of extrinsic rewards motivated action. When the giant Goliath challenged the Israelites, Saul promised riches and his daughter's hand in marriage to whoever could defeat him – strong, extrinsic motivation. David accepted the challenge, driven by the incentives of wealth, power and status. Saul's offer tapped into key extrinsic motivations to compel David's commitment. The promise of being a member of the king's household was enormous for someone whose daily chore was looking after sheep and goats. The picture David saw in his mind's eyes far out-shone his present circumstances and, consequently, diminished the risk of facing a giant and warlord who was famous for his rich resume in violence. From the conversation between David and Goliath on the war front, it was obvious that David was seeing beyond the giant. Appropriate motivation is a persuasive device to lionise and capacitate even the weak to achieve corporate goals. One sufficiently motivated man changed the destiny of a whole nation.

ii. Promising the Israelites a Bountiful Land (Exodus 3:7-8)

When seeking to motivate the enslaved Israelites to leave Egypt, Moses appealed to their intrinsic desire for freedom and autonomy. He promised they would escape servitude and inherit a new land “flowing with milk and honey” – an idealised vision tapping intrinsic motivations like prosperity and self-determination. The metaphor of a bountiful destination intrinsically resonated with and compelled the Israelites. Moses must have sufficiently painted a lucid and vivid picture of the land of Canaan such that Goshen, where they led a relatively better life than the rest of the Egyptians, paled into insignificance. If “cabbage” was the main attraction of Egypt, it was not to be compared to Canaan, which was dripping with milk and honey - two delicacies that spoke of good living and enjoyment. The vision of Canaan as a land of plenty must have been deeply etched on the minds of the Israelites, a people acclaimed for stubbornness, for them to accept to move from their comfort zone.

iii. Heaven’s Eternal Rewards

Christian theology leverages both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations in its promise of heaven. Descriptions of heavenly rewards, like streets of gold, magnificent mansions and reunions with lost loved ones, provide extrinsic motivations. Appeals to intrinsic motivations emphasise heaven as a place of eternal joy, fulfilment, and freedom from suffering and death. Vivid images of heaven’s splendour seek to intrinsically motivate faith and extrinsically reward devotion. The Bible says in 1 Corinthians 2:9:

Eye has not seen, nor ear heard,
Nor have entered into the heart of man,
The things which God has prepared for those who love him.

These words picture and represent imageries powered by motivation that sometimes compel men and women to embrace Christianity and cause those already in the faith to strive to make heaven.

Conclusion

Looking at these examples, we see biblical public relations using motivation similar to modern companies – by highlighting extrinsic incentives and intrinsic fulfilment to drive stakeholder commitment. Theology promises heavenly and earthly rewards to intrinsically and extrinsically motivate devoutness among religious stakeholders.

For persuasive communication to be effective as a public relations tool, it must be so couched that the target audience can identify how their individual and/or group interests are met. That is to say that something in the message should resonate with them.

Strategic communication, whose primary aim is to influence and trigger the desired action of the message from his audience, should go beyond their visual appeal and language correctness, recommended as these may be, in packaging and presentation. Research should be able to reveal values and areas of concern and interest that matter to the larger audience in order to achieve the desired response from them. In other words, it is necessary to take cognisance of what would motivate, convince and influence the target audience to act in a way that aligns with your goal.

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