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## **Assessment of Community Relations Strategies for Promoting Harmony between University of Delta, Agbor and Alihame Community in Delta State**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study was an examination of the community relations strategies for promoting harmony between University of Delta, Agbor and Alihame community in Delta State. The objectives of this study were to find out the extent of utilisation of community relations strategies by University of Delta, Agbor in maintaining mutual relationship with Alihame community; examine the community relations strategies of University of Delta, Agbor in building mutual relationship with Alihame community and find out the effectiveness of the community relations strategies of University of Delta, Agbor in building mutual relationship with Alihame community. The excellence theory was utilised as theoretical framework for the study. The researchers adopted the mixed research method with survey and interview as research instruments. Findings from the study showed that the extent of utilisation of community relations strategies by University of Delta, Agbor in maintaining mutual relationship with Alihame community is high; the community relations strategies of University of Delta, Agbor in building mutual relationship with Alihame community include the use of events, social media, alumni associations, Corporate Social Responsibility and infomercials and that the community relations strategies of University of Delta, Agbor in building mutual relationship with Alihame community is effective. Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that personnel of the CR unit of Delta State University, Agbor should be trained periodically to acquire the conceptual knowledge and technical skills required to relate effectively with the different publics of the University especially Alihame community members.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Community relations strategies (CSR), Assessment, Harmony, University of Delta, Agbor, Alihame community, Delta State.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Community relations have become more important due to the complexity of today's corporate environment and the resulting economic, social, and environmental imbalances. Organisations have attempted to be recognised by the community where they operate since the dawn of time in one form or another. Community relations refer to the interactions, partnerships, and communication efforts between an organisation, in this case, the University of Delta, Agbor, and the local community, Alihame community. It involves developing and maintaining positive relationships, addressing community needs and

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concerns, and engaging in collaborative initiatives that benefit both the institution and the community.

Harmony, in the context of this topic, refers to a state of peaceful coexistence, mutual understanding, and cooperation between the University of Delta, Agbor and Alihame community. It signifies a positive and symbiotic relationship where both parties work together towards common goals, respect each other's interests, and contribute to the overall well-being of the community. Community relations and harmony are closely interconnected. Effective community relations strategies play a crucial role in fostering harmony between the University of Delta, Agbor, and Alihame community. When the university actively engages with the community, listens to their concerns, and involves them in decision-making processes, it establishes a foundation of trust and communication (Wright, 2010). This, in turn, contributes to the development of harmonious relationships.

Without a doubt, community relations is essential to the success of any organisation. Therefore, the goal of community relations practise is to create a two-way dialogue that will aid in fostering peace between organisations and the communities they are located in (Hall & Baker, 2003). Communities play a major role in the business strategy that promotes the sustainable growth of corporate organisations' commercial operations via partnership activities that assist people reach their potential to live better lives and provide the groundwork for generations yet to come (Heath, 2005). The worldwide strategy for a symbiotic connection between mankind and its society for the advancement of everyone comprises respecting the culture of host communities (Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002). As such, there is need to study more on community relations strategies and their impacts in promoting harmony with host communities. It is on this background that this study assesses the community relations strategies for promoting harmony between University of Delta, Agbor and Alihame community in Delta State.

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

There is often no reciprocal interaction between organisations in Nigeria and the host communities where they operate. As a result, there tends to be tension between them, which may result in the failure of such organisations. Tertiary institutions, like University of Delta, Agbor, are examples of organisations that experts believe should always work to preserve a favourable public image, relationships that are mutually beneficial, and understanding with both their internal and external audiences. This is essential because there are now more post-secondary colleges in Nigeria than ever before, and these institutions are in a cutthroat battle with one another for the enrollment of new students. This research was conducted to, among other things, ascertain the state of community relations practise at University of Delta, Agbor with Alihame community because no such study has been carried out before thus creating a research gap.

### **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The objectives of this study are to:

1. ascertain the extent of utilisation of community relations strategies by University of Delta, Agbor in maintaining harmony with Alihame community

2. Examine the community relations strategies of University of Delta, Agbor in building harmony with Alihame community
3. Find out the effectiveness of the community relations strategies of University of Delta, Agbor in maintaining harmony with Alihame community

## CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

### Community relations

Community relations, as defined by Gower and Davies (2005), is a strategic communication process that focuses on building and maintaining positive relationships between an organisation and its external stakeholders, with a particular emphasis on the local community. It involves a deliberate and planned approach to communication, where strategies are developed and implemented to effectively engage with stakeholders. The primary objective is to establish and nurture positive relationships based on trust, mutual respect, and shared values. While community relations can encompass various stakeholder groups, it specifically prioritizes the local community, recognising its significance in the organisation's operations.

A key aspect of community relations is the understanding of community needs. This requires conducting research, gathering feedback, and actively listening to community members to gain insights into their unique characteristics, challenges, and aspirations. By understanding the needs, concerns, and expectations of the community, organisations can develop tailored communication strategies and initiatives that address these specific concerns. Open dialogue and engagement play a crucial role in community relations, as they foster transparent and two-way communication. Creating opportunities for dialogue and actively engaging with community members enables the exchange of information, ideas, and perspectives, facilitating a deeper understanding between the organisation and the community.

Furthermore, community relations efforts aim to align initiatives with community interests. This involves considering the community's priorities and aspirations when developing and implementing projects, programmes, and policies. By aligning initiatives with community interests, organisations demonstrate their commitment to being responsible and valued members of the community. This strategic approach enhances the organisation's reputation and builds a foundation of collaboration and cooperation, contributing to a harmonious relationship between the organisation, in this case, the University of Delta, Agbor, and the Alihame community.

Kotler and Lee (2005) define community relations as a form of stakeholder engagement that focuses on building mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and its surrounding community. It involves involving the community in decision-making processes, responding to their concerns, and collaborating on initiatives that promote shared values and goals.

According to Freeman (1984), community relations can be seen as an integral component of an organisation's corporate social responsibility (CSR) endeavours. In this context, community relations go beyond mere communication strategies and encompass active contributions to the social, economic, and environmental well-being of the local community. This definition highlights several key aspects:

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Firstly, community relations are viewed as a core element of CSR, emphasising the organisation's responsibility towards the community in which it operates. Rather than being solely profit-driven, organisations are encouraged to consider their impact on the local community and take proactive steps to contribute positively. Secondly, community relations involve active participation and contributions. Organisations are expected to go beyond passive engagement and take concrete actions to address social, economic, and environmental issues faced by the local community. This can include initiatives such as community development projects, educational programmes, job creation, environmental conservation efforts, and support for local businesses.

Furthermore, community relations encompass a holistic approach to well-being. It recognizes that the health and prosperity of the community extend beyond economic factors. Organisations are encouraged to consider the social fabric, cultural heritage, and environmental sustainability of the community in their initiatives. This comprehensive approach ensures that community relations efforts address a wide range of needs and contribute to the overall improvement of the community's quality of life.

#### **University of Agbor and Alihame Community**

The University of Agbor, Delta State, Nigeria is a relatively new institution, having been established in 2020. The university was established by the Delta State Government under the leadership of Governor Ifeanyi Okowa, as part of its efforts to improve access to higher education in the state. The University of Agbor is located in Agbor, a city in the Ika South Local Government Area of Delta State. The university is situated on a large campus that covers over 100 hectares of land, providing ample space for academic and administrative facilities, as well as student accommodation.

The university offers a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes across various faculties, including Arts, Education, Engineering, Law, Management Sciences, Natural Sciences, and Social Sciences. The university also provides facilities for research and innovation, with a focus on addressing the developmental challenges facing Delta State and Nigeria as a whole. Since its establishment, the University of Agbor has been providing education and research opportunities to students from diverse backgrounds. The university has also been actively engaged in community development initiatives, working closely with local communities to promote social and economic development.

Conversely, Alihame is a rural community located in the Ika South Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. The community is situated in the southern part of the state, between the towns of Agbor and Abavo. Alihame is a predominantly agrarian community, with farming and fishing being the main sources of livelihood for the residents. The community is known for its fertile land and abundant water resources, which support the cultivation of crops such as cassava, yam, maize, and vegetables, as well as the breeding of fish and other aquatic creatures. In addition to agriculture and fishing, the residents of Alihame are also engaged in other economic activities such as trading and small-scale manufacturing. The community has a vibrant market where people from neighboring communities come to buy and sell goods.

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## **Literature and Empirical Review**

One effective strategy employed by universities and organisations is engaging in community outreach programmes. These initiatives go beyond the boundaries of the institution and actively involve reaching out to the local community. By organizing educational programmes, health and wellness campaigns, skill-building workshops, and volunteer opportunities, universities and organisations demonstrate their commitment to the well-being of the community (Gower & Davies, 2005). These programmes provide tangible benefits to community members, such as access to resources, knowledge, and support. Through such engagement, institutions foster positive relationships, build trust, and establish themselves as valuable contributors to the community's growth and development.

Collaboration in community development projects is another significant community relations strategy. By partnering with local stakeholders, universities and organisations address community needs and promote sustainable development. These collaborations can range from infrastructure development and environmental conservation to social welfare programmes and capacity-building initiatives (Kotler & Lee, 2005). Through joint efforts, institutions demonstrate their commitment to the long-term well-being of the community and establish mutually beneficial relationships. Collaboration allows for shared resources, expertise, and knowledge, resulting in more effective and impactful outcomes for the community.

To ensure community involvement and participation in decision-making processes, universities and organisations often establish advisory boards or community committees. These entities serve as platforms for community representatives to provide input, share perspectives, and contribute to the development and implementation of policies and initiatives (Rawjee & Hussain, 2014). By including community members in these decision-making processes, institutions promote transparency, accountability, and democratic governance. This approach fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment within the community, as their voices are heard and considered in shaping the institution's actions.

Open and transparent communication channels are crucial for effective community relations. Establishing platforms such as community forums, town hall meetings, or online portals allows universities and organisations to engage in ongoing dialogue with community members. These channels provide opportunities for community members to voice concerns, provide feedback, and participate in discussions (Gower & Davies, 2005). By actively listening to the community's needs, institutions can better understand their aspirations, challenges, and expectations. Meaningful communication fosters mutual understanding, builds trust, and enhances the institution's reputation as an engaged and responsive partner in the community.

Universities and organisations can contribute to the local economy and community well-being by supporting local businesses and promoting economic development. This can include initiatives such as sourcing goods and services locally, providing entrepreneurship support, or offering training and mentorship programmes (Kotler & Lee, 2005). By nurturing local businesses and economic growth, institutions create employment opportunities, stimulate economic activity, and improve the overall quality of life in the community. These efforts strengthen community ties, foster economic resilience, and position the institution as a catalyst for local prosperity.

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Investing in education and scholarships is a powerful community relations strategy that benefits both the institution and the local community. By providing educational opportunities and financial aid to students from the community, institutions contribute to human capital development and social mobility (Kotler & Lee, 2005). This investment creates positive impacts on individuals' lives and strengthens the relationship between the institution and the community. It demonstrates a commitment to nurturing talent, expanding educational access, and empowering individuals to contribute to the community's progress.

Engaging in research that addresses community concerns and sharing knowledge with the community is another valuable community relations strategy. Universities and organisations can conduct research projects in collaboration with community members, focusing on topics that are relevant to the community's needs. By sharing research findings and knowledge through community workshops, publications, or conferences, institutions contribute to community development and empower community members with information (Gower & Davies, 2005). This strategy promotes evidence-based decision-making, supports community-led initiatives, and enhances the capacity of the community to address its challenges effectively. By implementing these diverse community relations strategies, universities and organisations can foster meaningful relationships, address community needs, and contribute to the overall well-being, development, and harmony of the local community.

Rajwee and Hussain (2014) investigated the role that public relations plays in crisis communication at tertiary institutions. This was done in acknowledgment of the fact that the process of crisis communication is an essential component of the responsibilities that community relations performs. The findings of the study indicate that educational establishments of a higher level need to implement a risk policy that delineates the roles that should be played by departments of community relations and communication. According to the recommendations made by Rawjee & Hussain (2014), senior management at a variety of tertiary institutions should make the establishment of community relations and communication departments a priority for their respective institutions.

Campbell (2018) conducted research on the community relations practises of higher education institutions, and his findings highlighted the connection that exists between internal and external communication, as well as the value that each brings to the institutions. The results of the research showed that the responsibilities and activities involved in community relations were almost entirely recorded in written form as a matter of standard operating procedure. Mustofa and Kurnia (2021) found that the reputation of an institution was shaped by factors including institutional publicity, internal and external events, community involvement with stakeholders, the formation of institutional character (Identity), and persuasion and diplomacy (Lobby and Negotiation) conducted by the institution to their respective publics.

Boakye (2012) conducted research in Ghana to investigate the impact that public relations play in the achievement of the organisational objectives of four private colleges that were picked from the Ashanti Region of Ghana. These institutions were chosen at random. According to the findings of the study, only one of them had a department of community relations, while the other three had Assistant Registrars and Registrars who were already saddled with administrative and other non-communication responsibilities, but they were acting in the capacity of community relations practitioners in their respective institutions. The overwhelming responsibilities of Assistant Registrars and Registrars prevent their institutions

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from making the most of the benefits of effective community relations. These benefits include the creation, maintenance, and securing of mutual understanding and cooperation between organisations and their respective publics.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **The Excellence Theory**

The Excellence Theory, developed in the 1980s by James E. Grunig and his colleagues, is a prominent public relations theory that focuses on the strategic management of communication within organisations (Grunig, Grunig & Vercic, 2000). It originated from extensive research conducted at the University of Maryland, where the aim was to explore the role of public relations in organisations and its impact on organisational effectiveness. Through the study of numerous organisations across various industries, including profit and nonprofit sectors, the theory was formulated.

The Excellence Theory is built on several key tenets. Firstly, it emphasises the importance of symmetrical communication, which involves two-way dialogue and mutual understanding between organisations and their stakeholders (Grunig, 2000). This approach fosters trust and long-term relationships, contrasting with the less effective one-way communication. Secondly, the theory positions public relations as a crucial management function that should be integrated into an organisation's decision-making, goal setting, and strategic planning processes. By doing so, public relations can contribute to overall organisational effectiveness and help achieve objectives.

Relationship building is another central tenet of the Excellence Theory. It underscores the significance of cultivating and maintaining relationships with stakeholders such as customers, employees, investors, and the media (Grunig & Repper, 2000). By prioritising trust, mutual understanding, and shared values, organisations can foster positive attitudes and behaviors from stakeholders. Additionally, the theory emphasizes the need for rigorous measurement and evaluation of public relations efforts. Through research and data analysis, organisations can assess the impact of their communication activities on organisational goals, enabling informed decision-making and continuous improvement.

The theory is relevant to this study because it provides a framework for how community relations should be structured and implemented. It explains how community relations can contribute to organisational excellence. The theory is relevant for this study because it provides an understanding of the rationale, purpose and direction of community relations strategies of tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

The theory will also help to evaluate the effectiveness of the community relations practice in tertiary institutions and also help to determine to what extent the tertiary institutions are amassing value from their community relations activities. Since the two-way symmetrical is considered to be the most effective and efficient model as a result of its ability to build and sustain long term relationships between the organisation and its stakeholders, the theory will help determine if the PR practitioners in the Technical Universities employ this model and the benefits that they have accrued so far.

## METHODOLOGY

The researchers adopted the mixed research method for this study because using one research design would not be enough to garner information for this type of research thus the interview design complemented lapses in the survey research design. The survey was chosen to get the views of University of Delta, Agbor members of staff on the subject matter.

The population of this study was the total population Agbor in Delta State where both University of Delta, Agbor and Alihame Community are located. According to the National Population Census (2006), the population of Agbor is sixty seven thousand, seven hundred and ten (67, 710). A sample size of 384 respondents were taken for the study from the populations of the study. The sample for the study was gotten, using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size calculation formula. Thus, 384 respondents were sampled. The simple random sampling technique was adopted. Respondents were randomly chosen and the reason was to enable an equal opportunity for everyone. Meanwhile for the interview, the respondents were randomly selected from the members of staff in University of Delta, Agbor especially the ones in the community/public relations department. Three members of staff from the community relations department were randomly selected. Simple percentage and frequency tables were used to analyse data gathered from the survey. Furthermore, the explanation building model was used to analyse the data gathered from the interview.

### Data Presentation

**Table 1: Extent of Awareness of community relations strategies for promoting harmony between University of Delta, Agbor and Alihame community in Delta State**

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Very High	165	43.7
High	173	45.8
Neutral	0	0
Low	24	6.3
Very Low	16	4.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source: Field Survey, 2023**

Table 1 showed that the extent of awareness of Assessment of community relations strategies for promoting harmony between University of Delta, Agbor and Alihame community in Delta State was high. The implication of this is that the community relations strategies were of high public significance.

**Table 2: Channels of exposure to University of Delta, Agbor community relations strategies**

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Social media	314	83.0
Radio	17	4.5
Television	13	3.4
Newspaper	6	1.6



Magazine	3	0.8
Indigenous media	0	0
Friends	25	6.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source: Field Survey, 2023**

From table 2, we find that majority of the respondents (n=314, 83%) were exposed to the University of Delta, Agbor community relations strategies via social media.

**Table 3: Community relations strategies used by University of Delta, Agbor**

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Events	96	25.4
Infomercials	86	22.7
Social media	13	3.4
Alumni associations	12	3.2
Corporate Social Responsibility	171	45.2
Others	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source: Field Survey, 2023**

Data from Table 3 indicate that events, infomercials, social media, alumni associations and Corporate Social Responsibility all the respondents are the community relations strategies used by University of Delta, Agbor in maintaining mutual relationship with Alihame community. However, CSR was the most dominant one.

**Table 4: Extent to which prominence given to community relations strategies of University of Delta, Agbor influence your interest in the school**

Variable	Frequency	Percentage %
Very High	118	31.2
High	149	39.4
Moderate	68	17.9
Low	32	8.5
Very Low	11	2.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source: Field Survey, 2023**

Data on table 4 indicates that majority of the respondents (n=267, 70.6%) are of the view that to a high extent, prominence given University of Delta, Agbor community relations strategies influenced respondents interest in the case. The implication is that the more the institution promotes or relates with members of the society; there is every tendency that such strategies would have positive influence on community members.

#### **Data from Interview response**

#### **What is the extent of utilisation of community relations strategies by University of Delta, Agbor in maintaining mutual relationship with Alihame community?**

Community relations play a key role in stakeholder engagements of organisations. As educational institutions, the study assessed the extent of utilisation of community relations strategies by University of Delta, Agbor in maintaining mutual relationship with Alihame

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community. According to the findings, the stakeholders of University of Delta, Agbor include: students, prospective students, staff, parents, local communities, partners and regulatory bodies. As stakeholders, Alihame community members are vital to the university's operations and decisions and that the extent of exposure of the stakeholders to community relations strategies of the institution is high. According to P1:

University of Delta, Agbor existence largely depends on stakeholders such as Alihame community. Everything that we do, we take them into consideration because if those people are not well handled it can negatively affect the university. To directly answer your question, extent of exposure of the stakeholders to community relations strategies of the institution is high. The reason is that we frequently carry out community relations activities in the community.

Another participant explained that Alihame community were stakeholders and one of the university's major and significant stakeholders.

**What are the community relations strategies of University of Delta, Agbor in building mutual relationship with Alihame community?**

The participants discussed the community relations strategies University of Delta, Agbor uses in maintaining cordial relationship with Alihame community. The participants revealed that the various community relations roles such as management of protocols, relationships with alumni, as well as events were spearheaded by different people who are superintended by the main community relations Directorate. But there have been compromises made due to the deficiency in staff members, resulting in individuals performing more than one community relations role in the institution. Specifically, the participants suggested the community relations strategies used by University of Delta, Agbor in building mutual relationship with Alihame community include the use of events, infomercials, alumni associations and social media.

One of the findings of the study was the revelation by P2 that the community relations department was responsible for the management of the university's website as well as its social media handles by strategizing and deciphering contents to best position the university in a favourable light. Research is also prioritised by the university according to him.

As part of our duties, we also are responsible for the website of the university. We put in content and monitor what goes on there. We also handle all the social media handles of the university by putting in very attractive content. We also assist the directorate of the academic affairs in the enrolment drive of the university.

**What is the effectiveness of the community relations strategies of University of Delta, Agbor in building mutual relationship with Alihame community?**

One of the most notable aspects of one of the interviews with one of the participants was the recognition of the effectiveness of the community relations strategies of University of Delta, Agbor in building mutual relationship with Alihame community. It was also found that community relations strategies of University of Delta, Agbor, has been effective in enhancing the university's image.

A participant explained how pivotal community relations have been to the actualisation of their organisational goals. This is so because the university realises the need for rebranding to

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restore public faith in technical universities. The explanation underscored the prominence of the various stakeholders to the strategic communication efforts of the university.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The findings of the structured interviews performed with officials from the University as well as questionnaire to members of the community highlighted community relations as a crucial pillar in the communication and interaction with the different stakeholders and publics. The use of community relations was strengthened by the need of altering the narratives that Delta State University and Agbor universities are the domain of students who are academically unable to succeed, as well as the requirement to generate an increase in the number of enrollments. The universities have community relations departments but the varied tasks vary. Yet, most of them were challenged by the fact that the community relations role was not recognised as a management function, producing subsequent challenges including insufficient financial allocations, inadequate logistics and under-staffed community relations departments.

According to the findings of the research, the community Relations section of University of Delta, Agbor is primarily reaching out to the communities that are located in and around the university, particularly the Alihame community. As stated by participant one in the interview: “the extent of exposure of the stakeholders to community relations strategies of University of Agbor, Alihame community is high” and the reason is that the community relations department of the school frequently carry out community relations activities.

Also, the findings of the study indicated that the PR unit is efficient and active in utilising the media in promoting access to the university as a means of enhancing the image of the University and projecting the University to its publics. This was demonstrated by the fact that the community relations unit was shown to be involved in these activities. According to participant 2, the university's use of community relations has substantially impacted positively on its relationships with Alihame community, as well as helped the university to make strides in managing its reputation. In spite of this, community relations professionals working for the university have not yet made full use of the potential presented by the use of tools and channels such as research, radio, television, and print media in order to promote the objectives of the institution.

The use of various community relations tools and channels, such as media relations, events, and infomercials, is also consistent with the recommendations of other scholars in the field of community relations, such as Rajwee & Hussain (2014). They emphasise the importance of using a variety of communication channels and tactics to reach different audiences and achieve communication objectives.

### **CONCLUSION**

The researchers conclude that the community relations activities of University of Delta, Agbor comprised media relations publicity and events, utilisation of media infomercials. Nonetheless, it seems that the realm of community relations at the educational institutions is broadening, since some of the participants mentioned additional activities such as advertising, marketing, and research, as well as internal communication and crisis communication.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that:

1. Personnel of the community and public relations unit of University of Delta, Agbor should be trained periodically to acquire the conceptual knowledge and technical skills required to relate effectively with the different publics of the University especially Alihame community members
2. Community relations department of University of Delta, Agbor should develop a comprehensive strategic community relations framework/plan borne out of research and extensive stakeholder engagements to help integrate all the community relations operations for the attainment of the broader organisational goals.
3. University of Delta, Agbor also needs to establish a community relations department with its incendiary compliments; scale up, and also employ better effective community relations strategies in line with the pertinent issues in Alihame community in order to achieve effectiveness in its community relations campaigns or activities.

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