

# IvoryNG



*A Lifestyle...Expanding Opportunities*

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DR. PHIL OSAGIE

**BUILDING BRIDGES  
THROUGH PR**

## Editor's note



**D**r Phil Osagie is not like your typical chief executive officer. At least he didn't strike me as one judging from my meeting with him and generally how he went about the business of the day in his Opebi office. He exudes a camaraderie that is difficult to find between a typical Nigerian boss and his or her staff. I had heard from a few people besides his staff, that he is quite down to earth but it took just one afternoon to conclude that his personality wasn't an exaggeration. Little wonder he is considered to be one of the most successful players in the public relations field. And why not? It is near impossible to dominate in a field that requires a good public perception for 25 years – both for yourself and the clients you offer your services - if you carry an overweight chip on your shoulder. This is also not forgetting his competence, passion and commitment to his calling.

As our cover personality for the months of September and October, Dr Phil Osagie who doesn't even look a day older than 61 (he will be 62 on November 2th) tells Nkarenji Ukonu in this interview, who the sum total of Phil Osagie is and what makes him tick.

Nkarenji Ukonu



# DR. PHIL OSAGIE

**M**ost successful personalities and corporate organizations reach their peak and win public admiration due to the outcome of their actions and reports made on them. Behind the scene of those success stories are the image merchants who work out the script to fashion out their reputation. And this is where Dr. Phil Osagie deploys his skills and know how as the Head Strategist for JSP Canada and JSP Communications Nigeria, one of the leading marketing communications agencies in Africa, in creating a positive perception for individuals and organizations. He has been known to create 'magic' via PR campaigns for some of the world's most admired brands such as NBC Coca-Cola, GSK, Cotecna, Intel, Microsoft, FedEx/RedStar Express, Symantec, Notore, Africa-Re, Guaranty Trust Bank, Emirates Airline, P&G, Chevron, Olashore International School etc. just to mention a few. He has also been a PR consultant to World Business Forum in New York and the Academic Association for Surgeons, International Conference (AAS) among other notable institutions. He is a recipient several awards and commendations from far and near for exhibiting exemplary leadership qualities in his chosen profession.

Your PR firm is largely based here but you run it from outside the country. Why is this so?

It is becoming a cliché to say that the world is becoming more and more, a global village. And these days, with the way businesses are run, the factory is the brain, not necessarily the space you occupy. So in my opinion, certain services isn't dependent on where you are located but on what you have to offer. It doesn't matter where I am to offer the service that I do, what matters is the quality of what I have to offer.

What was the attraction for you in opting to be a Public Relations practitioner?

I had a choice of doing both PR and advertising because of my background. I once worked at Insight Communications, one of the leading advertising firms in this country. While I was there, I was doing two jobs for the price of one; advertising and PR. I felt PR was more niche, more personalized, more individualistic, fresh and it resonates better with me. But the advantage I had is the fact that I understand advertising and marketing but I chose to specialize in PR. It is difficult to do both under one umbrella as you have to make a choice. But if you understand both, you can make a choice and do it well. Who knows, maybe one day, I just might form an advertising agency or something of that nature.

JSP Communication has been operational for 25 years old. What





do you think is responsible for your staying power, especially since so many PR agencies spring up regularly but are unable to survive infancy?

Well we go through challenges like any normal business but I think what keeps us going is the fact that we are not transaction-

al by nature; with the people we deal with – the media, our clients, suppliers. What we have with them is real, authentic and as a result of that, our clients trust us enough to remain with us. We hardly loose clients and those we have lost, over the years we have been operational, is an insignificant

number. We probably have the best crop of clients. Our clients trust us because we don't make promises we can't keep. They find us authentic because we are not flashy, so to speak. We are a little bit conservative and ethical.

With my staff, we take care of each other and look



out for each other. Even when things are tough, we stick around. Most of my staff have been with me for a long time; they are like family with me and even when things are tough, we suffer together and when its rosy, we enjoy together. So these are some of the things that has kept JSP Communications going.

Many outfits springing up regularly and call themselves PR agencies without getting the requisite certification or even membership of professional bodies to provide some sort of authenticity. Why is this so and can a PR agency operate without membership of a professional body?

Membership of professional bodies such as - Nigeria Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) the regulatory body for the practice in the country or Public Relations Consultants Association of Nigeria (PRCAN), a prestigious group for agencies responsible for laundering the image of corporate bodies and political groups - is a good thing. With NIPR, one has to take the exams just so you have a basic understanding of what PR is. PRCAN offers training from time to time. What that does is that it offers a bit of protection to both clients and practitioners. There are basic standards that must be met before one can join these professional bodies, such as the quality of graduates one must employ, the number of departments a standard PR agency must have (client service, accounting etc.) These standards must be met and kept. Unfortunately, these standards are hard to enforce which is why you have a lot of agencies

practicing PR without certification. Membership of these professional bodies doesn't necessarily give one more business, but it helps as it offers some sort of authenticity.

**What if one has membership of these two professional bodies and is unable to set up an office as is required but desires to practice?**

I think it can be worked out. One can have a virtual office. It happens a lot abroad. But to appear credible, you must have an office. It doesn't have to be an elaborate one anyway.

**Being a veteran in the game, are you into mentorship?**

I do but I want to do more of it because I believe I have a responsibility to make others better. I am involved in a lot of charity work. Judging by my background, I consider myself extremely fortunate which is why I want to lift as much people as I can. I do not like to brag but in Nigeria's PR industry, it's hard to see people rise in an organization the way they do in JSP Communications. We have had people who joined as cleaners and have risen to become managers. Here anyone who comes, becomes better because the environment compels you to be. I don't only encourage them to be smart but to be smarter than our clients because you can't service someone and not be smarter than them. Not in a competitive way but in a way that the client will respect you. I don't have the time to mentor too many people, but I give my time to as many people as possible.

**What do you find most challenging in your line of work?**

Being a Christian in a field where some of the most foundational ethics are constantly being compromised. When we started, we told ourselves there are some things we won't do; there are some businesses we won't take even if you offer us a billion dollars. We have lost some businesses because we refused to do some things that are not ethical. But that's okay, better to get things on merit. I keep two things in mind: God is the most important fac-





tor in all that we do; and then for the kind of clients that we service, I know that what's important to them is to get results. They want a partner that can help them achieve their goals. If we can make ourselves be that partner, then all is good. And so far, I think we're constantly scoring high.

**What was it about your growing up years that prepared you for a life of entrepreneurship?**

My parents influenced my life. They weren't rich; my dad was a school administrator and my mum was a petty trader. They sold almost all they had to send me to the university in the UK. My dad had an old car he sold to pay for my first year in school. At that time, it was a lot of money. Subsequently, I worked to pay my way through school. When I finished, I came back home and wanted to go back for my masters. My dad wanted me to take a break but my mum agreed with me, closed down her business, sold her allocation for distributorship which was my entire school fees and gave me the money.

My mum isn't educated formally but she is smart and very wise and I do everything she says. I used to work in Kaduna as a journalist. My mum just told me one day to head to Lagos because she felt that Lagos would be better for me being the capital in those days. I did and that was how my life changed. I came to Lagos, I didn't know anyone. I was going from company to company in search of a job; newspaper houses, advertising agencies etc. With advertising agencies, when I walk in, if I like the atmosphere, I stay and ask to see the person in charge. Sometimes I got lucky, other times, not so lucky. And if I don't like the atmosphere, I don't bother to say anything, I just leave.

So I went to Insight Communications and asked to see the MD. I was obliged. It was the founder, Biodun



Shobanjo and I began to tell him about myself and what I was capable of doing for about an hour. The position I was given was going to be advertised but he took a chance with me. Advertisement for the position got cancelled and that was how I began work there. While at Insight, I fine-tuned and sharpened my communication and PR skills and when The Quadrant Company, the first fully fledged PR Consultancy in Nigeria was founded years later, I became the pioneer general manager.

So basically, my mother, parenting, influence of things I read, self-belief, all helped to shape me into who I am today. I have always believed that God has a special plan for me. I know I am a special person, not in an arrogant way but I always believe that no matter where you are, it is not your final destination. That is my philosophy in life and that helps me go through life with less stress. When I do so well at any point in my life, I am always of the belief that I can do better as that isn't the best of me or if the reverse happens to be the case, I do not believe that is the end of life. That always keeps me going. I am always looking out for new horizons.

So the story of my life is just so remarkable because where I was coming from was totally unbelievable and where I am now could only have been propelled by God.

Has going into politics ever crossed your mind?

If I have to go into politics it would be to play behind the scene, maybe in an advisory capacity but not to aim to be governor or any frontline thing. I don't like the headlines too much. But I always say in life,

never say never.

How do you let off steam when you aren't working?

I like to read the bible; I wish I could read it more. I love basketball too. I used to play a lot of basketball but now, I just enjoy watching it. I also like to play golf. I also like to take care of plants.

If you weren't a public relations expert, what else would you have found joy doing?

Perhaps any other area of communication or work with a foundation as I love to help people. Or perhaps, be in the real estate business.



