

A Well-Oiled Strategy Machine

By Robert A. Kelly

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Yes, that's what public relations really is when it tracks important external audience perceptions and follow on behaviors. And again when it does something about those perceptions and behaviors by reaching, persuading and moving to actions you desire, those people whose behaviors affect your organization the most.

All of which makes it much more likely that you will achieve your operating objectives.

So, could this be the time to put a new public relations program in motion that will provide you with results like these?

- 0 Make sales prospects aware of your product and service values and convert many of them to customers.
- 0 Reinforce those same product and service values with your existing customers and keep many of them.
- 0 Boost your productivity by persuading your employees that you really do care about them.
- 0 Avoid unnecessary problems by insuring that the minority community knows you don't discriminate.
- 0 Make employee hiring and retention problems a thing of the past by convincing community residents that your business is a good place to work.
- 0 Avoid "bad press" by being straightforward and responsive to media queries – and NEVER lie to them!
- 0 And nail down that joint venture or strategic alliance by quickly knocking down negative rumors started by trouble-making competitors.

Now, here's how the well-oiled strategy machine that produces such results can support your objectives and work hard for YOU..

Decide up front who matters most to you among those outside audiences of yours. Whose behaviors can make or break your day? Which audiences produce the most significant impacts on your organization?

Let's call that outside audience #1 on the priority list and work on it right now. Of course, other external audiences will require your attention in due course.

First question: how do members of this key target audience view your organization and its products and services? Always surprises me how many business people answer this question vaguely, if at all.

To get those and other useful responses, you must interact with those individuals and ask a lot of questions. For example, what do you think of us and our products/services? Or, have you had any problems with our services or products?

Be especially alert to negative responses or even undertones. And watch closely for inaccuracies that need to be corrected, or misconceptions you must clear up. Rumors, of course, must be addressed directly and killed dead, to emphasize the point!

Now you're ready to set your public relations goal. Namely, correct that inaccuracy, or clear up that misconception, or kill that rumor. Keep your goal zeroed in on the precise negative you wish to correct.

What now? How will you reach that goal? Of course with a strategy, and you have three available to you: create opinion where there isn't any, alter existing opinion, or reinforce it. The goal you already set will determine which strategy choice you make.

The quality of the message you send to your key outside audiences will have a huge bearing on whether their perceptions can be altered in your direction. For instance, if your message persuades them that the rumor that you dump chemicals into the river is simply not true, you will sense the change in their perception and, thus, their behavior as they again cooperate and/or do business with you as before.

Keep your message as compelling as possible, persuasive of course, and crystal-clear as to its meaning.

Next stop? Call in the "foot soldiers," aka communications tactics, to carry that outstanding message of yours to the

right eyes and ears. Luckily there are many, many communications tactics available. For example, personal contacts, letters-to-the-editor, press releases and speeches. Or, emails, brochures, radio/newspaper interviews and newsletters. The only requirement is that each tactic you choose have a proven record of reaching members of the target audience you want to reach.

Now, some weeks after your communications tactics went into action, you will be curious to know if you are making any progress towards altering key audience perceptions.

Best way to find out is to ask the same key audience members you questioned during your initial fact finding mission.

Same questions, but now you're anxious to know if their perceptions have been altered in your direction because that will suggest that behavior changes can soon be expected.

Now, if you note some opinion alteration, but not enough, you must take two actions. One, review your communications tactics for mix and frequency adjustments. And two, look closely at your message to see if it is as clear and compelling as it could be. And also whether your facts and figures really support your view that the inaccuracy is unfairly damaging to you.

Happily, your prize for using a well-oiled strategy machine like public relations will be the altered perceptions you desire, leading to behaviors that contribute directly to the success of your business.

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Bob Kelly counsels, writes and speaks about the fundamental premise of public relations. He has been DPR, Pepsi-Cola Co.; AGM-PR, Texaco Inc.; VP-PR, Olin Corp.; VP-PR, Newport News Shipbuilding & Drydock Co.; director of communications, U.S. Department of the Interior, and deputy assistant press secretary, The White House. <mailto:bobkelly@TNI.net>
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