

# A Winning Public Relations Game Plan for 2002

By Robert A. Kelly

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I have learned in my public relations work, especially from leaders in the field, that there are only three ways a public relations effort can impact behavior: create opinion where it doesn't exist, reinforce existing opinion or change that opinion. No surprise that the process by which those goals are realized is known as public relations. So, while behavior is the goal, and a host of communication tactics are the tools, our strategy is the leverage provided by public opinion.

Which is precisely why this article is titled "A Winning Public Relations Game Plan for 2002." Winning, because the plan is based squarely on the reality that people's perceptions of the facts directly affect their behaviors. And that something CAN be done about those underlying perceptions, especially in a land celebrated for the free exchange of ideas.

I believe this is the Rosetta Stone of public relations, i.e., a clue to understanding that has provided the knowledge and experience needed to effectively address both the positive and negative challenges posed by public opinion in a free society.

Fortunately, public relations will continue to create, change or reinforce public opinion by reaching, persuading and moving-to-action those people whose behaviors affect the organization. When the behavioral changes become apparent, and meet the program's original behavior modification goal, that public relations venture can be called a success.

And so it will be again in 2002, hopefully a year in which the American economy again points to growth and expansion.

## Prioritize Your Audiences

If you follow a game plan similar to this one, you would

start with a priority-ranking of those audiences with an interest in your organization, often referred to as stakeholders or “publics.” Included would be customers, prospects, employees, media, the business community and local thought-leaders as well as a number of other possible interest groups.

### What Do They Think of You?

As time allows, interaction of one kind or another with key audiences will provide you with their impressions of your organization, in particular areas where problems may be brewing. This is information gathering, opinion sampling, informal polling if you will, but essential to any public relations effort. If resources are available, a modest opinion poll of the priority audience would be helpful.

### How Much Behavioral Change is Needed?

With opinion sampling underway, it's a good time to focus on the possibly negative behaviors these impressions, these perceptions have created. Once they are identified and understood, a marker can be set down establishing the degree of behavioral change that realistically can be expected and monitored.

This becomes the program goal against which the program will finally be measured.

### Create, Change or Reinforce Opinion?

Now, it is a short step towards establishing whether perceptions and opinion among those key audiences must be created from scratch, nudged in one direction or another, or simply reinforced. An important decision because it will influence the direction, content and tone of all of your communications.

### The Persuasive Message

Then, it's time to prepare messages tailored to each audience that, while providing details about your products and service quality and diversity, indirectly address those potential problem areas that came up during the information gathering meetings. Of special concern in preparing the messages will be your behavior modification goal and the audience perception adjustments necessary to achieve it.

### Reaching Your Audience

How will you communicate each message to its audience? How will you reach these people? Your choices include face-to-face meetings, briefings, news releases, news announcement luncheons, media interviews, facility tours, special promotional events, a brochure, and a variety of other communications

tactics.

And don't forget special events as a means for reaching those target audiences with your messages. They are usually newsworthy and include activities such as financial roadshows, awards ceremonies, trade shows, contests or open houses.

### Media That Target Your Audience

It sounds elementary, but selecting the right media to carry your messages demands that you be certain that each communications tool zeros in directly on the target audience. Example: no sense in using ride-time (rush hour) radio appearances if you're trying to reach retirees.

### Signs of Improvement

So, how will you know whether your efforts are actually changing perceptions (and behaviors) for the better? As time passes, experience shows that you will begin to notice increased awareness of your organization and its role in the marketplace; a growing receptiveness to your messages by customers; a growing public perception of the role your organization plays in its industry and in the community, as well as increasing numbers of prospects.

### Achieving The Goal

To track actual results, you or your colleagues must speak on a regular basis with people among each of your key audiences, as well as by monitoring print and broadcast media for mentions of your messages or viewpoints, as well as through interaction with key customers, prospects and influentials. Each of these indicators will reflect local, individual perception of your organization which, in turn, will gradually begin to approach the degree of behavior modification you seek.

The effort is worth it. Done correctly, when public relations results in modified behaviors among groups of people important to your organization, you're talking about nothing less than its survival.

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