

# Anxious About Your Public Relations?

By Robert A. Kelly

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Shooting from the hip always creates anxiety.

Especially when managers order a communications tactic here, another there, but fail to base them on a realistic public relations goal and strategy. One that could increase the chances they'll get the results they want.

Why waste resources this way when a little more effort can bring public relations success?

I mean, firing off communications tactics without knowing precisely how that target audience perceives your organization, and who your tactics should be aimed at, then failing to decide what changes in perception, and thus behavior you need and want, is like pouring resources down the you-know-what.

How much better to do it this way.

Who's the real public relations target? Is it not that external audience whose behaviors have the most important impacts on your organization? Shouldn't you eagerly court such people and focus your public relations efforts directly on them because your enterprise may be at stake?

Of course.

One way to approach the challenge is to decide up front which groups of people – which external audiences – really DO affect you the most.

Could it be those residents in a certain geography? Or those folks you know regularly use your services or those of your competitors? Or those who are members of trade unions? Or those between the ages of 21 and 35.

Doesn't really matter which, as long as you have solid reasons for targeting that #1 target audience. Namely, that their behaviors, good or bad, really DO have the most serious impacts on your organization.

What now? Take nothing for granted. Get out there as soon as possible and interact with members of that key audience. Monitor their perceptions by asking questions. What do you think of our organization? How about our products and services or, if you are an association or non-profit, our programs? Do you sense an undercurrent of negativity? Probe deeper to see if some basic misconceptions are at work. Or inaccurate perceptions or damaging rumors that may be at fault.

The answers to such questions should be studied carefully and a public relations goal created that, when achieved, corrects the problem you uncovered. It might be as simple as knocking down that trouble-making rumor once and for all. Or, you may want a goal that clarifies an unfortunate misconception, or an inaccurate belief about your organization. Even a "confused feeling" about your people will need attention.

Your brand new public relations goal leads directly to your next step – a strategy that shows clearly how to reach that goal. Will you attempt to create opinion (perceptions) where none may exist? Or will you strive to change existing opinion? Occasionally, you'll even decide to reinforce a slightly positive perception so that it grows to a strongly positive belief about your organization.

That's right! There's just three strategic choices – create, change or reinforce perceptions. That simplifies things.

Now, with your chosen strategy in hand, what will the corrective message you wish to convey look like? It must be persuasive, and that requires candor, clarity and directness, if there is such a word. Be brief, to the point and, of course, completely straightforward so that further misunderstanding is just not possible.

At last in their proper role, we come to the "beasts of burden," the communications tactics that will carry your crystal-clear message to the attention of members of your key target audience.

The list of such tactics is, literally, endless. You could start with letters-to-the-editor, press releases and broadcast interviews, then proceed to making speeches as well as arranging community briefings and open houses. You might even decide to ratchet up the tactics effort with special events, a series of targeted emails or face-to-

face meetings with a thoughtleader segment of that key target audience.

Now up to this point, after two or three months of vigorous communications, what do you really know? Not much, until you determine whether you've actually impacted those target audience perceptions.

Sorry, but that means monitoring opinion all over again. So fan out again among key audience members and ask lots of questions one more time.

What are you hearing? Playback or feedback suggesting that a misconception has been clarified? That a damaging inaccuracy no longer dominates? That a rumor has been disarmed?

Remember, your public relations goal implies that perceptions and, thus, behaviors among your #1 external audience must be altered before you can declare victory.

So, when your remonitoring activity clearly reflects perceptual and behavioral movement in your direction, you have achieved your public relations goal.

If remonitoring reflects otherwise, you must consider increasing the mix and frequency of your communications tactics. And your message must be reanalyzed again for believability and impact.

Either way, you are no longer wasting your public relations resources because you have a proper plan with a proper strategy, message and communications tactics.

And that suggests you will not fail because you are no longer shooting from the hip. So last step? Bag the anxiety!

end

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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