

Are You a PR Chowderhead?

By Robert A. Kelly

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You are if you stand by while your public relations people futz around with communications tactics instead of nailing down those outside audience behaviors that help you reach your objectives.

No slap at communications tactics. They come in real handy at the right time, as noted later in this piece.

But the real public relations opportunity lies with this reality: People act on their own perception of the facts before them, which leads to predictable behaviors about which something can be done. When we create, change or reinforce that opinion by reaching, persuading and moving-to-desired-action those people whose behaviors affect the organization, the public relations mission is accomplished.

What it does for you, is put the spotlight where it belongs by delivering the key external audience behaviors you need to help achieve your mission objectives. So look at tactics for what they are -- no substitute for a primary public relations effort.

For example, change perceptions and, thus, behaviors among those important outside audiences of yours, then watch for activity like customers making repeat purchases, capital givers or specifying sources looking your way, prospects starting to do business with you, community leaders seeking you out, organizations proposing strategic alliances and joint ventures, and legislators and political leaders viewing you as a key member of the business, non-profit or association communities.

It just isn't that hard to do it right.

Check out the PR work underway in your unit for activities like these. Has anyone listed those outside audiences with the

greatest impact on your specific operation? Has that list been prioritized according to the severity of those impacts?

Do you have any real idea of how those key target audiences at the top of the list perceive your organization? That's really important because, as the fundamental premise cited earlier notes, those perceptions inevitably morph into behaviors that can help or hurt achieving your unit objectives.

Of course there's work involved in pulling this off. You, your colleagues or somebody, must get out there and interact with members of that key target audience.

And ask a lot of questions like "Have you heard of us? Have you had contact with us? Was it satisfactory in all regards?" Of course, all this time you are listening carefully for any negativity while staying alert for evasive or hesitant responses, and especially for untruths, inaccuracies, rumors or misconceptions.

The data you collect, you will use to establish your public relations goal, i.e., the specific perception to be altered, followed by the desired behavior change. In other words, your objective here is to correct those untruths, inaccuracies, misconceptions and rumors.

But goals are worthless without strategies. Happily you have three of them to choose from: create perception/opinion where there isn't any, change existing perception, or reinforce it. Let your public relations goal point to the obvious choice.

Now you put on your writer's hat and write a really persuasive bit of prose – the corrective message you will use to create, change or reinforce individual opinion among members of that target audience. Clarity is really important, as is accuracy and believability. The more compelling the message is, the more it helps alter what a lot of people believe, so try hard to "compel" the reader.

Luckily, you have a herd of "beasts of burden" – the communications tactics mentioned earlier – that will carry your "message of inspiration" to the eyes and ears of your target audience.

The tactics range from newsworthy surveys, all kinds of speeches and letters-to-the-editor to press releases, brochures, radio and newspaper interviews and just about everything in between. One caveat: make sure the tactics you select have a proven record of reaching people like those in your target audience.

Pretty soon you will ask yourself, "Are we making any progress in altering the offending perception?" Assuming you

don't want to spend a lot of money on professional opinion surveys, (any more than you did earlier in this drill), you'll have to remonitor that target audience's perceptions.

Big difference this time is, you'll be watching carefully to see, while asking the same questions again, to what degree the offending perception has now been altered. In other words, how much that perception is actually moving in your direction, AND how likely it is to deliver the behaviors you really want.

That is to say, you have no chance of becoming a chowderhead when you use the fundamental realities of public relations to safely nail down the outside audience behaviors that help you reach your objectives.

end

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