

Can Small PR Firms Deliver Huge Results?

By Robert A. Kelly

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They can when they invest in the basics. The best of them obviously rely on some form of public relations fundamental premise to produce winners across business environments from rockets and orange juice to product recalls and indicted CEOs.

But, chances are the top producers among small PR firms have built their businesses on a premise like this one:

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.

Public relations firms who do not base their work on a premise like this one are well-advised to consider doing so.

The reason? Their clients are subject to the same realities as the rest of us, realities that never change. People usually behave based on their perception of the facts. And clients usually demand certain behaviors from those “publics” whose behaviors have the most impact on their businesses.

Even more to the point, when client managers start looking for a return on their public relations investment, they want to see the kind of key stakeholder behavior change that leads directly to achieving their objectives.

Which is why, especially for the small PR firm anxious to meet client needs, there is no better performance measure at which to aim.

However, for those small PR firms not yet guided by any kind of public relations fundamental premise, here is a suggestion.

Consider the premise outlined above, then take a shot at convincing a new or current client to let you produce a broader, more productive public relations effort for his or her company. And remember, the fundamental premise of public relations outlined above is a great equalizer placing all public relations firms on a level playing field when it comes to the effectiveness of the process. It especially targets those firms with a client who expects the best value from PR dollars spent, not simply a limited and mechanical publicity placement effort.

In other words, consider using the premise as a means for going after higher quality new business, or upgrading an account and broadening the work performed for a savvy client who wishes to squeeze every benefit out of the money they spend on public relations.

Start by listing a client's most important outside audiences in priority order – audiences whose behaviors directly and visibly affect client success or failure. At the top of such a list are usually prospects and customers. But it could well include community residents, business and political leaders, suppliers, minorities, fraternal groups, nearby military personnel and union leaders. The target list might even include "clients of your client" where such activity is a high priority for that client.

The test for listing an audience is this: does its behaviors affect my client's business in any way? If they do, they belong on the list.

Obviously, you must now determine what members of that key external public think about your client and his or her business, in order to build and implement a successful public relations effort. And that means interacting with members of that audience and asking a lot of questions. What do they think about your client company and its products and services? Are there signs of negativity? Misconceptions? Inaccuracies? Rumors?

The answers to these questions allow you to establish the corrective public relations goal, i.e., a specific perception and, thus, behavior change. For example, clear up that misconception, correct that inaccuracy, or knock down that rumor as soon as possible.

How do you achieve that goal? Right! You select a strategy that will get you from here to there. And there are just three strategies to deal with a perception challenge: create perception (opinion) where there may be none, change existing perception, or reinforce it. Your choice will be dictated by your new public relations goal.

Clearly the most challenging step in this sequence is preparing the right message for delivery to the target audience. It must make a compelling case, so think about it carefully. It must state clearly that the offending misconception, inaccuracy or rumor is not the truth. Instead, layout that truth in a credible manner. The hallmarks of such a message are clarity, persuasiveness, credibility, believability and a compelling presentation.

Now it's time for the "beasts of burden," the communications tactics which will carry your carefully-scripted message to the eyes and ears of that target audience. Happily, there are a ton of such tactics at your disposal. Of course, you will want to double check the ability of each to zero in on your specific audience. As most PR firms are aware, they range from newsletters, press releases and radio and newspaper interviews to newsworthy surveys, sports sponsorships, op-eds and many, many more.

In short order, clients will be interested in evidence that the public relations effort is achieving results. The best way to demonstrate progress is by reporting on the results of a new round of perception monitoring among members of that target audience. You're looking for signs that their perceptions now reflect the corrective elements of your message

Your clients are subject to the same realities as the rest of us, realities that never change. As noted, people usually behave based on their perception of the facts. And clients usually demand certain behaviors from those "publics" whose behaviors have the most impact on their businesses.

Small (and large) PR firms have little choice but to go after those perceptions with a vengeance.

That is how that small PR firm can deliver huge results.

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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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