

Can Your PR Game Plan be Salvaged?

By Robert A. Kelly

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If, as is often the case, you are preoccupied with communications tactics instead of working a plan to actively pursue those outside audience behaviors that stop you from achieving your objectives, the answer is yes.

Fortunately, it's no big deal making the switch to a public relations problem-solving sequence that works. Simply accept 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 this approach to public relations can do for businesses, non-profits and associations, is help them alter the perceptions, and thus behaviors of their most important external audiences, those with the greatest impact on their operations. This can make achieving their objectives much easier, and much more likely.

Here's how it could work for you.

Sit down and list those outside audiences of yours whose behaviors can damage your organization's prospects. Then, put them in the order of how severe their impacts are, and we'll work on #1 on that list.

First objective is to create a public relations goal. So, because it's likely there are negative perceptions out there, you and your cohorts must meet with members of that target audience and interact with them. Ask many questions such as "What do you know about us? Have you had any kind of contact with us? What have you heard about our products or services?"

And while you're asking those questions, keep your eyes and ears peeled for evasive or hesitant answers. And also for negatives like inaccuracies, untruths, misconceptions, hurtful rumors and false assumptions.

Your public relations goal can now be established using the responses you just gathered. And that goal will be the specific perception you wish to alter, usually leading to the behavior change you really want. For example, goals like, correct that inaccuracy, clearup that misconception, or squash that hurtful rumor once and for all.

What you need to know most about your new public relations goal is, how do I get from here to there, and what action program will be most appropriate? Your strategy will give you the answer. But you have only three choices when it comes to strategies for opinion or perception matters.

Reinforce existing opinion, change it, or create perception/opinion where none exists. But make certain the strategy you select clearly fits your public relations goal. Obviously, you would not select the "reinforce it" strategy option when your goal is to change a damaging rumor.

Writing, like it or not, is the next challenge. You need a message carefully prepared to alter your key target audience's perception. But writing it is no walk in the park.

The message must not only be corrective and crystal-clear, it must also be compelling if it is to move your target audience member's perception in your direction – a must, if those desired behaviors are to come about.

Like the military officer calling in artillery fire during combat, you must call in your communications tactics to carry your message to its target, the members of your target audience.

The arsenal is full of such tactics ranging from personal contacts, group briefings, press releases and speeches to emails, letters-to-the-editor, brochures, celebrity appearances and many, many others.

The only caution here is, check carefully that each tactic you choose has a proven record for reaching people like those who make up your target audience.

It won't be long before urgent questions are raised. "How are we doing? Are we making any headway towards our goal?"

It would be ideal if your budget could accommodate the considerable costs of professional opinion surveys to answer those questions. However, as you did at the start of the program, you can again monitor perceptions among members of your target audience by asking the very same questions you used the first time around.

But now, you will watch carefully for indications that your message and communications tactics are moving audience perceptions in your direction.

You can always provide a boost to the effort by adding new tactics to the mix as well as increasing their frequencies. And check your message again to insure its impact and factual accuracy.

What you will have accomplished is the timely use of the fundamental realities of public relations. In this case, to salvage an unsatisfactory PR program so that it now delivers the external audience behaviors you need to help you reach your objectives.

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