

# Could This Be The Best Way To Measure Public Relations Results?

By Robert A. Kelly

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Could be. In fact, I believe it is. How can you measure the results of an activity more accurately than when you clearly achieve the goal you set at the beginning of that activity?

In my opinion, you can't. It's pure success when you meet that goal.

Public relations is no different. The client/employer wants our help in altering counterproductive perceptions among key audiences which almost always change behaviors in a way that helps him or her get to where they want to be.

And why are we uniquely qualified to do that job?

Because everything we do is based on the realities that people act on their perception of the facts and that we can do something about those perceptions. When public relations activity successfully creates, changes or reinforces that opinion by reaching, persuading and moving-to-action those people whose behaviors affect the organization, the public relations effort is a success.

But before we follow that client/employer on his or her way to that kind of successful public relations end game, a few words about the measurement challenge itself.

It's a large challenge and one that stands between us and the achievement of that conclusive indicator showing that our public relations investment has been applied wisely.

Unfortunately, traditional public relations performance measurement methods are subjective and open to varied interpretation because we do not have viable and widely accepted public relations measurement standards.

Instead, as we attempt to evaluate public relations

performance now, we must use highly subjective, very limited and only partially applicable performance judgements. Among them, inquiry generation, story content analysis, gross impressions, and even equivalent advertising value.

It's incredible when you think about it.

Here we are, part and parcel of America's multi-trillion dollar industrial, educational and organizational colossus and, yet, we cannot demonstrate conclusively – that's **CONCLUSIVELY** – that we achieved our public relations program's behavioral goal.

Why? Because, as of today, it costs **WAY** too much public opinion survey money to demonstrate conclusively that we achieved the public relations perception and behavioral goal set at the beginning of the program. In many cases, the opinion research costs more than the entire underlying public relations program. Thus, it's almost always set aside in favor of "winging it."

What are we to do?

This article highlights what many professionals already know. We need this final step in the public relations problem solving sequence, and we need it badly.

What can be done? I like the NASA approach. When money is especially short, these dedicated people repeatedly find a way around the problem using an amazing mix of technology innovation, operational creativity and raw determination.

Here, in the year 2002, why cannot the best minds in the fields of public relations, sociology, psychology and opinion gathering attack the challenge of **PROVING CONCLUSIVELY** that a given public relations campaign has – or has not – changed target audience behaviors as planned at the beginning

of the program, and do so without bankrupting its participants? Until an answer to that question presents itself, let us follow our client/employer as s/he pursues that successful public relations end game.

Take the client/employer bedeviled by activists who perceive his or her organization as despoilers of the environment, or whose newly introduced kitchen appliance is perceived as unsafe, or who is perceived as profiting from the labors of underage workers in its Far Eastern manufacturing plants.

Common to each are negative perceptions which invariably lead to negative behaviors such as calls for more government regulation, legal challenges, falling product sales, declining share prices and boycotts, to name a few.

Secure in the knowledge that public relations problems are nearly always defined by what people think about the facts rather than the actual truth of the matter, the public relations team faced with such challenges must now mount its attack. In particular to alter counterproductive perceptions and behaviors, and achieve the behavioral goal set at the beginning of the activity.

First, it assesses the accuracy of each allegation. If there is some truth to it, immediate remedial action is called for. Even if it is patently untrue, the damaging perception remains and must be confronted.

Now we identify our key audiences by starting with a priority-ranking of those audiences with a clear interest in the organization, often referred to as “stakeholders” or “publics.” Here, among others, we might spotlight customers and prospects, the trade and business communities, employees, local thought-leaders and media in field locations, as well as a number of other possible stakeholder groups.

Then, through industry and community contacts as well as opinion sampling, we determine the level of individual concern, i.e., the degree of awareness, personal feeling and emotion about the allegations and where they are the strongest among the organization’s key audiences.

Now, we establish the public relations goal. Namely, to change public perception of the negative allegations from negative to positive.

Within that overall public relations goal, we set down our perception and behavior modification objectives which obviously will require considerable communications firepower to achieve. However, once the negative perceptions are truly understood, such a progress marker can be set down, and agreed upon, thus establishing the degree of behavioral change that can be expected.

Here, we determine the public relations strategy. We only have three choices: CREATE opinion where none exists, CHANGE existing opinion, or REINFORCE that existing opinion. In this case, it is clear that considerable existing opinion has turned negative so the public relations strategy will be to begin the process of changing that opinion – not creating or reinforcing it -- from negative to positive.

At this point, we begin preparation of what we hope will be persuasive messages for communication to our target audiences. Bringing those important audiences around to one’s way of thinking depends heavily on the quality of the messages we prepare.

At the least, the messages must disarm rumors and correct misstatements and inaccuracies thus providing a credible basis upon which individuals may alter their perceptions. Of course, pretesting a message for effectiveness with focus groups is always recommended.

With this homework completed, “communications weaponry” (how do we project our carefully prepared messages to our key audiences?) must be brought to bear.

Among examples of the wide variety of communications tactics available to us are face-to-face meetings, Internet ezines and email, hand-placed newspaper and magazine feature articles and broadcast appearances, special consumer briefings, news releases, announcement luncheons, onsite media interviews, facility tours, brochures and even promotional contests.

Especially effective in reaching target audiences with the message are newsmaker special events. They are newsworthy by definition and include activities such as financial roadshows, awards ceremonies, trade conventions, celebrity appearances and open houses.

The publicity, or communications effort can then be accelerated, insuring that the GROUPS of tactics most likely to efficiently reach our target audiences are chosen. Here we refer to major tactical activities such as key Internet communications, important podium presentations, top-level personal contacts as well as prime-rated print and broadcast media interviews. Because when such tools are used to communicate with each target audience, we want them to hit home!

Here, I want to monitor progress and look for signs of improvement. Public relations counsel and staff must speak regularly with members of each target audience, monitor print and broadcast media for evidence of the company’s messages or viewpoints, and interact with key customers, prospects and influentials. And, if resources allow, local market opinion polling should be included.

Finally, indicators that the messages are clearly moving opinion in your direction will start showing up. Indicators like comments in community business meetings, mentions in research analyst’s reports, local newspaper editorials, e-mails from members of target audiences as well as public references by political figures and local celebrities.

And that means we are approaching the end-game. When the changes in behaviors become really obvious through increased sales, print and broadcast reports, community-leader comment, employee and community chatter and a variety of other feedback – in other words, clearly meeting the original

behavior modification goal – two things have occurred. One, the public relations program is a success and, two, by achieving the behavioral goal you set at the beginning, you are using a virtually perfect public relations performance measurement.

The missing ingredient? Affordable public opinion research.

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