

Does Public Relations Really Matter?

By Robert A. Kelly

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It does if you want results like these:

- 0 Make sales prospects aware of your product and service values and convert many of them to customers.
- 0 Reinforce those same product and service values with your existing customers and keep many of them.
- 0 Boost your productivity by persuading your employees that you really do care about them.
- 0 Avoid unnecessary problems by insuring that the minority community knows you don't discriminate.
- 0 Make employee hiring and retention problems a thing of the past by convincing community residents that your business is a good place to work.
- 0 Avoid "bad press" by being straightforward and responsive to media queries – and NEVER lie to them!
- 0 And nail down that joint venture or strategic alliance by quickly knocking down negative rumors started by trouble-making competitors.

What's common to each of them? You've used the fundamental premise of public relations to create results specific to your business at a time of your choosing – and each was successful.

Can these results be repeated every time, everywhere? Probably not, but certainly often enough to help your business stay successful.

Here, in my opinion, is the best way to use that fundamental premise of public relations to your best advantage. First, better

read it.

People will act on their own perception of the facts before them. And those perceptions will lead 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 folks whose behaviors affect your business, the public relations effort is a success.

It works this way.

List your most important external audiences and put the one that impacts your business the most at the top of the list.

Now you must interact with members of that key target audience. Meet with a few people to find out what they think of you, your business and your products and services. Notice any negativity or brewing problem areas.

Strive to understand what's causing the negative perceptions among these people so important to your business. Then decide how much behavioral change you realistically can achieve in the agreed upon time frame.

You've just set your public relations goal: a specific behavior change.

But what strategy will achieve that change? The answer is actually very simple. You have just three choices: create opinion (perception) where none exists, change existing opinion, or reinforce it. This is an important decision because it will influence the direction, content and tone of all of your communications.

Which brings us right to those persuasive messages you will need.

Remember, while including details about your products and services, your messages must identify what is really at issue at the moment, impart a sense of credibility to your comments, and regularly assess and reassess how opinion is running among that group. And, you must indirectly, yet persuasively address any problem areas that surfaced during your information gathering meetings. And keep in mind your behavior modification goal, especially the needed perception changes.

At this time, communications tactics come to the fore. Ask yourself, how will I reach my target audience members with my messages?

There are literally scores of tactics available to you. Media interviews, emailings, brochures, speeches, face-to-face

meetings, open houses and other special events, news announcements and many, many others.

Now, you must monitor results by interacting again with members of that key, target audience, and by keeping an eye on print and broadcast media for references to your messages or viewpoints.

Because such indicators will reflect how local feelings about your organization are changing, you'll then have a chance, if needed, to adjust both those communications tactics and message content.

As time passes, you'll begin to notice increased awareness of your business and its role in the marketplace; a growing receptiveness to your messages by customers and others; increased public perception of the role your organization plays in its industry and in the community, as well as increasing numbers of prospects.

By this time, I hope you're persuaded that building a public relations component into your organization does matter, and that it can make a major contribution to your success.

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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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