

Don't Put Up With "Junk PR"

By Robert A. Kelly

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In public relations, “junk” is more about attitude and lack of understanding than a measure of quality.

Hopefully, if your public relations mission is yet to be accomplished, you agree that its primary thrust **MUST** be to take advantage of the fact that people act on their own perception of the facts before them leading to predictable behaviors. Then create, change or reinforce that perception/opinion by reaching, persuading and moving to actions **YOU** desire, those people whose behaviors most affect your organization.

If you buy that idea, you might also agree that a preoccupation with things like brochures versus press releases versus newsletters could be seen as a “junky” approach to public relations. Particularly when you compare it to a comprehensive plan that targets the kind of stakeholder behavior change that leads directly to achieving your objectives.

And those objectives may include customers who make repeat purchases, prospects converted to customers, beneficial joint ventures and strategic alliances, unions more frequently bargaining in good faith or your suppliers doing everything they can to expand the relationship.

How do you find such a plan? Please keep reading.

First, have you ever sat down and listed every outside audience whose behaviors impact your business in any significant way? Well, list them now, then rank them according to how serious each impact is, and let's work on the external audience at the top of your list.

How frequently do you interact with members of that target audience? Probably not frequently enough to be really aware of how they feel about your organization. You must interact

regularly and ask a lot of questions like “What do you think of our business? Have you had experience with our services or our products?” All the while remaining alert to any negativities, especially damaging rumors, inaccuracies, misconceptions and the like.

Best part of this drill is that the data you gather while monitoring target audience perception leads directly to your public relations goal. In other words, the specific perception alteration and, thus, behavior change you want. But to get there, you must alter those perceptions in such a way that misconceptions are cleared up, rumors are neutralized and inaccuracies are fixed.

The question then becomes, how do you position this message so that it can do what it’s supposed to do? You select a strategy, of course. You’re in luck in that there are just three strategies from which to choose. Create perception/opinion where there really isn’t any, change existing perception, or reinforce it. When you choose your strategy, make sure it matches the goal from which it flows.

Here, real work rears its ugly head. You must prepare the message you hope will alter perception, and thus behaviors in your direction. No easy task but it really is “where the rubber meets the road.” Imagine writing something that ends up changing somebody’s opinion? Now that’s satisfaction!

But the message must highlight the truth in a credible manner while addressing the problem that came up when you monitored your target audience perceptions. Your message must make a compelling case for your point of view, and do so persuasively, with clarity, believability and in a compelling way.

Then you must throw that message to receivers in the end-zone. You must take advantage of the long list of communications tactics available to you to carry that message to the eyes and ears of members of your target audience. You can use facility tours, contests and press releases or speeches, media interviews, newspaper guest columns, emails and many, many others to do the job.

Your real challenge is deciding if you are making acceptable progress. Because you will probably balk at spending a lot of money on professional opinion research, you and your colleagues must then go back to your target audience members and ask the same questions all over again.

What you want to see are indications that perceptions are changing, as the corrective elements of your message take effect.

By the way, if things aren't moving along fast enough for you, you can always add more tactics to the effort as well as increasing their frequencies. It's also a good idea to take another look at your message to make certain that it measures up as to factual support, clarity and impact.

Finally, you may be certain you have avoided "junk PR" when your public relations effort targets the kind of stakeholder behavior change that leads directly to achieving your objectives.

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Bob Kelly counsels, writes and speaks to general management personnel 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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