

Don't Waste Money on Public Relations

By Robert A. Kelly

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Demand that it pull its own weight in your boat by working to create, change or reinforce how your organization is perceived by those vital, external audiences, those groups of people who REALLY affect your business the most.

This is key to your success because, like it or not, people take action based on the facts they see before them. And that can create behaviors that impact your business, sometimes negatively.

Why take any chances? What you need to do is take steps to create, change or reinforce that key audience's opinion by reaching them, persuading them and moving them to take the actions you desire

Does it work every time? No.

Is it easy? No.

Is it necessary? Yes.

I recommend working with a local public relations specialist because your work day probably leaves little time for this activity, and you may have minimal experience to bring to the party.

So, before hiring anyone, try out this notion on him or her.

What we know is that people will act on their own perception of the facts before them. And we know that those perceptions will lead to predictable behaviors, but about which something can be done. Then, 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.

If you're met with the equivalent of a blank stare, look elsewhere.

Once you find a compatible public relations person, let's roll! For openers, you'll earn his or her enduring support when you commit to take action when your information gathering turns up troubling perceptions among those target audiences.

First, try to be a regular speaker in your marketing area, an interviewee for radio and newspapers, a sponsor of special events and an active member of local business and fraternal clubs. You put "money in the good will bank" when you do this, against the day trouble breaks out.

Start by staying in touch with groups of people whose actions help or hinder your operations. What do they believe about your products and services and your organization itself? Stay alert to potential problems. This is the fact finding, information gathering phase.

Then list your key audiences. But, at first, just the ones whose actions REALLY concern you. Begin interacting with them. They can include stakeholders like customers, employees, prospects, media, community residents, local government agencies and many others.

Make a promise to yourself to take the following actions when you discover a troubling perception.

First, set down your public relations goal. Examples: neutralize that negative rumor; pacify that activist group; restore the faith of that group of former customers, or reinforce your prospects' interest in your product or service.

In any case, left unattended, each can hurt your business.

Next, HOW will you approach the perception problem? In other words, what is your strategy?

We know there are just three ways to deal with such an opinion problem. Create new opinion, change existing opinion, or reinforce it.

Decide which it is, and proceed. But work closely with your public relations advisor by preparing persuasive messages carefully and creditably designed to counter the misconception you have uncovered. Try out the messages on a few outsiders to see just how persuasive they really are.

Now, you must select the communications tactics – "beasts of burden," I call them – to carry your persuasive message to the eyes and ears of that crucially important target audience.

You have a huge choice of such communications tactics ranging from emails, press releases, media interviews and newsletters to personal meetings, speeches, open houses and dozens of others.

But your job is still not completed. You must continue to monitor members of your target audience to measure not only awareness of your message, but how well is it being received, and even did it get there in the first place?

Then, if necessary, adjust your message content and the communications tactics.

To recap, until something better comes along, we have little choice but to track perceptions among key audiences the best way we can. Then, create, change or reinforce that opinion by reaching, persuading and moving-to-desired-action those people whose behaviors effect the organization.

Adopting this kind of sequence puts the odds in your favor that the money you spend on public relations will not be wasted.

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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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