

Doubt PR's Clout? Don't!

By Robert A. Kelly

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Robert A. Kelly
bobbkelly@TNI.net

PRCommentary.com <http://www.prcommentary.com>

Done right, it helps modify the behaviors of your most important target audiences, and that can spell S-U-R-V-I-V-A-L.

I don't believe that's an overstatement because a customer who thinks badly of you and your business will not soon be darkening your threshold.

Nor are you likely to see prospects who know little or nothing about you.

Ditto for people who may be miffed about something you, or one of your people, said or did publicly.

And forget about those folks with a REAL beef about your business. Like "I didn't get what I thought I paid for," or "it didn't live up to its promise" or "my emails weren't answered" or "they take 5 days to answer a phone inquiry."

Let's face it, meeting this challenge is either a priority for you or it isn't.

If it is, here's a little advice.

First, you should know that public relation's clout is rooted solidly in its fundamental premise:

"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 the enterprise, the public relations effort is a success."

And THAT'S clout in any language!

But the trick lies in using it to your best advantage. So, because few

of us can do justice to a dozen target audiences at once, let's start by selecting the one with the most impact on your business. Members of such an important group could range from homemakers, teenagers or retirees to 30-something males, techies or military dependents on a nearby base. Only you can say.

Now, do you know everything you should about the members of that audience, that "public?" Are you aware of how they perceive you and your business, if at all? Probably not in enough detail, so you need to take the time to meet with several individuals drawn from that audience. Listen carefully to their feelings and beliefs about your business, its products and services. And be sensitive to media mentions of your business.

Pay special attention to any hints of misconceptions and inaccuracies about you and your business, as well as possible trouble areas that might be brewing.

With those data gathered, you and your public relations advisor can set your strategy. And that means deciding whether the opinions you've gathered from members of your key audience need to be created (in the absence of any opinion), changed or simply reinforced. There must also be agreement on the time frame in which the activity will take place.

This is especially important because you must now prepare persuasive messages to be aimed at those whom you discovered are harboring misconceptions, or no perceptions at all about you. Your objective will be to move that opinion in your direction.

Which brings us to our "beasts-of-burden" – the communications tactics designed to carry those persuasive messages to members of your key target audience.

There are dozens of communications tactics available to you. Everything from media interviews, news releases and letters-to-the-editor to facility tours, personal meetings and newsletters.

But your work is still not done. To get the clout promised at the top of the article, you must monitor your progress by continuing to interact with folks from your target audience. The key is watching and listening carefully for indications of a new awareness of you, your business and how it functions in both the community and your special marketplace.

At the same time, a sign that progress is being made will appear in the form of a new receptivity to those persuasive messages by members of your key target audience.

Of course, how much progress you achieve will depend heavily upon your continued personal involvement in the activity, and the amount of effort you invest.

Finally, as welcome signs of modified target audience behaviors begin to appear, team members may take heart that the clout offered by public relations has once again prevailed.

end

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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