

# How About MANAGING Your Own PR?

By Robert A. Kelly

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It's one thing for a senior manager to approve story angles for the publicity folks to use in shopping around for print and broadcast placements. Not an especially large amount of managing needed there.

It's quite another matter, however, when that senior manager, with the best interests of his or her own department or unit in mind, actually overlooks the reality that people act on their own perception of the facts, leading to predictable behaviors about which something can be done on his or her behalf. Then compounds the error by failing to insist that the PR people make a special effort to create, change or reinforce the perceptions of those external audiences whose follow-on behaviors really DO impact his or her unit.

That's a bit of too bad because those two, core, public relations functions require hands-on managerial cooperation throughout the organization if it's to get its money's worth. The two functions deserve first-class treatment because they help each manager target the kind of stakeholder behavior change that leads directly to achieving his or her objectives.

Pretty important stuff!

What it says to business, association and non-profit managers is this: a key part of your job description is – or should be – do everything you can to help your organization's PR effort as it strives to persuade important stakeholders to your way of thinking. And particularly when the program works to move those stakeholders to behaviors that lead to the success of your department and your programs.

In your own best interest, that means assuring yourself that your public relations program is actively MANAGED to that end.

Has anybody to your knowledge sat down and listed those external audiences whose behaviors could hurt your unit badly? Then prioritized them according to the impacts they have on your operation? This is a necessary first step in creating the right public relations goal for you. Here, in fact, is how public relations activity could proceed on your behalf.

Let's take a look at the audience at the top of your target audience list. Because there could be negative perceptions out there, some of your colleagues will have to interact with members of that audience and ask a number of questions. "Do you know anything about our organization? Have you had any kind of contact with our people? Have you heard anything good or bad about us or our services and products?" Watch respondents closely for hesitant or evasive answers. And stay alert for inaccuracies, rumors, untruths or misconceptions.

The responses gathered by this kind of perception monitoring among members of the target audience provides grist for your public relations goal. Namely, the specific perception to be altered, followed by the desired behavior change.

While the goal by itself isn't of much use, with the right strategy, the public relations program is off to a good start. Fortunately, there are just three strategic choices for dealing with matters of opinion and perception. You can create perception/opinion where there may not be any, you can change existing opinion, or you can reinforce it. An effort should be made to match the strategy to the specific goal. For example, if you want to correct a misconception, you need the strategy that changes existing opinion, not one that reinforces it.

Now, some serious writing is needed. The corrective message to be communicated to members of the target audience is an opportunity to write something designed to change individual opinion, and that's a positive experience for any writer.

Clarity is first, followed closely by accuracy and believability. Stick closely to the issue at hand – like an inaccurate belief, a misconception or a dangerous rumor. A compelling tone is useful because the message must alter what a lot of people believe, and that is a big job. Tryout the message on some colleagues for effectiveness.

With goal, strategy and message in hand, it's time to call in the "Beasts of Burden" – the communications tactics that will carry that first-class message to the attention of members of the target audience. Luckily, there are many, many such tactics ranging from luncheons, news releases and personal contacts to print and broadcast interviews, speeches, press releases and dozens of others. Only requirement is that they have a proven track record

for reaching your target audience.

In short order, colleagues will inquire whether any progress is being made in altering the offending perception or opinion. Ruling out an expensive opinion survey, your best hope of assessing progress is to return to the field and re-monitor the target public member's perception.

While you ask the same questions as in the initial monitoring session, the difference now is you're looking for evidence in the responses that the offending perception is, indeed, being altered. What you want to see and hear are signs that perceptions are actually moving in your direction because, then, you know that positive behaviors cannot be far behind.

By the way, you can always move things along at a faster clip by adding a few more communications tactics, and even increase their frequencies. Your message should also be re-vetted again to double-check its clarity and factual accuracy,

One way to persuade your operation or department's key stakeholders to your way of thinking – and move them to behaviors that lead to the success of your organization – is to insure that the public relations effort on your behalf is actively managed along such lines every step of the way.

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