

# How Do You Explain Public Relations To A Non-Public Relations

## Audience?

By Robert A. Kelly

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none  
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Here's the way I'd explain it:

First, I want to give you a quick overview of where I believe public relations is today. And second, an equally brief run-through of how I believe the process can work to the advantage of your organizations.

Now, in case you just asked yourself, what am I doing here?, let me say that I believe deeply that public relations, properly executed, can be crucial to the success of ANY organization. So, this is a topic that must be of interest to a non-public relations audience whose members care about their organization and, hopefully, who work productively with their own public relations people. I hope you will agree at the end of the talk.

Let's start with a few givens.

The fact is that NO organization – business, non-profit or public sector – can succeed today unless the behaviors of its most important audiences are consistent – I guess we say “in-sync” these days – with its objectives.

So, for most of your organizations, that means public relations professionals must modify somebody's behavior if they are to hit their objective and earn a paycheck – everything else is a means to that end.

Which is why, when public relations goes on to successfully create, change or reinforce public opinion by reaching, persuading and moving-to-action those people whose behaviors affect the

organization, it accomplishes its mission.

So, if your organization isn't getting the behavior changes it wanted at the beginning of the program, it's wasting its public relations investment. On the other hand, one way management can increase its comfort level with that investment, is to make certain those behaviors ARE modified as agreed upon up front. That way, management KNOWS it's getting its money's worth.

Here's why I say that. People act on their perception of the facts, and those perceptions lead to certain behaviors. Which means that, at the end of the day, management must keep its eye on the end-game because the main reason we do public relations in the first place is to change the behaviors of certain groups of people important to the success of our organization.

While on the way to this goal, we insure that our activity nurtures the relationships between those target audiences and our organization by burnishing the reputation of its products and services. Yes, we'll do our best to persuade those audiences to do what our organization wishes them to do. But, while seeking that public understanding and acceptance, we'll insure that our activities not only comply with the law, but clearly serve the public interest. It is then that we pull-out all tactical stops to actually move those individuals to action.

But where does it all begin? For emphasis, let me repeat something I said a moment ago. The practice of public relations is based upon three realities:

- 0 People act on their perception of the facts;
- 0 Perceptions lead to behaviors;
- 0 Something can be done about those perceptions and behaviors that leads to achieving the organization's operating objectives.

But, too many of us – inside and outside the public relations business – don't think of public relations in that broad a context. Instead, public relations is defined by only one or two of its components: "PR is all about publicity," or "PR is really crisis management" or "PR is primarily special events" when, in fact, it's based upon the three realities above.

All of which brings me to a leading question: What IS a public relations home run?

My answer to that question is short and sweet and, by now, you probably can anticipate it: The public relations professional must modify somebody's behavior as agreed upon at the beginning of the program. When accomplished, THAT is

the public relations home run, and that is the way we earn our paychecks – as noted above, everything else really is a means to that end.

What I want to do here, is demonstrate a logical progression in public relations problem solving with the emphasis on a clear, defined result that meets a key business objective.

And by the way, one reason I define a public relations home run that way is because I believe very few general management people, including those in this room, ever think about PR this way. I want to get your attention by announcing that, in public relations, a home run can mean nothing less than survival when it successfully changes the perceptions and, hence, the behaviors of certain groups of people important to the success of the organization.

In other words, when those changes clearly meet the original behavior modification goal set at the beginning of the program, the public relations effort is successful.

Do I expect this general management audience to question whether public relations is REALLY equipped to do that? I certainly HOPE you will!

Answer? Yes, because our roots are planted deeply in the principle that people act on their own perceptions of the facts. When public relations successfully creates, changes or reinforces public opinion by reaching, persuading and moving-to-action those people whose behaviors affect the organization, its mission is accomplished.

Aha, you will ask, but does it work out in the REAL world? It does, and here's how:

First, we identify the key operating problem to be addressed. For today's talk, I'll use the example of a national marketer of furniture imported from the Far East. Let's say we receive news reports and other input, amplified by competitive trouble-making out in the trade, about rumors circulating to the effect that serious quality problems have cropped up in the company's factories in Southeast Asia.

Here, we verify whether the allegation is true or false. We want to clearly understand how vulnerable we may be. So, because the company's sales have leveled off and are starting to decline, public relations counsel and staff, working closely with the company's manufacturing people here and abroad, establish conclusively that reports and rumors of declining quality are without foundation, and simply untrue. Obviously, were they true, the major corrective

responsibility would fall to the manufacturing and international marketing people in the company.

But since the rumors are NOT true, we want to verify the status of both consumer and trade perceptions of the company's product quality. Again, we want to be certain about this step because, here, we establish the specific public relations problem.

But, a surprise! Probing consumer opinion through personal contact and informal polling out in the market place, counsel and staff determine that, in fact, there really IS a disturbing perception out there that the company's furniture line is "of low quality and is overpriced."

It's useful to make the point here that public relations problems are nearly always defined by what people think about the facts, as opposed to the actual truth of the matter. And, in this example, it's clear that negative trade and consumer perceptions about the company's products, however inaccurate they may be, really do account for the decline in showroom traffic and sales, and must be confronted.

So now, we establish the public relations goal. Namely, begin the process of changing public perception of the company's furniture quality from negative to positive, which will lead to consumer behavioral changes, in turn attracting furniture buyers to company showrooms once again.

Now, and within the overall public relations goal, we set down our perception and behavior modification objectives. They will be measured in terms of customers returning to the showrooms, along with increasing sales, in the first three to six months following the program's kickoff, which obviously will require considerable communications firepower to achieve. Once the negative perceptions are truly understood, such a progress marker can be set down, and agreed upon, establishing the degree of behavioral change that can be expected.

Now we determine the public relations strategy. We only have three choices: CREATE opinion where none exists, CHANGE existing opinion, or REINFORCE that existing opinion. In this case, it is clear that considerable existing opinion has turned negative on the quality of the company's furniture, so the public relations strategy will be to begin the process of changing that opinion from negative to positive.

At this point, we identify key audiences. Public relations counsel and staff start with a priority-ranking of those audiences with a clear interest in the organization, often referred to as "stakeholders" or "publics." In this case, at the top of the list is the furniture-buying public –

customers and prospects – as well as the trade and business communities, employees, local thought-leaders and media in the company's retail outlet locations, and a number of other possible stakeholder groups.

Here, we begin preparation of what we hope will be persuasive messages for communication to our target audiences. Bringing those important target audiences around to one's way of thinking depends heavily on the quality of the messages we prepare.

It's a challenge. The messages must disarm the rumors circulating in the furniture community with clear evidence of excellent design and construction quality, and seconded by credible third-party endorsements such as satisfied customers and top design consultants. They will impart a sense of credibility to the company's statements.

Regular assessments of how opinion is currently running among target groups must be performed, constantly tweaking the message and, finally, action-producing incentives for individuals to take the desired actions must be identified and built into each message.

Those incentives might include the very strength of the company's forthright position on the quality issue as well as the high-credibility endorsement, or plans for expansion that hold the promise of more jobs and taxes, or sponsorship of a new furniture cable TV design show.

So, how will target audiences in the various company locations actually be reached? Among a wide variety of available communications tactics, choices include face-to-face meetings, Internet ezines and email, hand-placed newspaper and magazine feature articles and broadcast appearances, special consumer briefings, news releases, announcement luncheons, onsite media interviews, facility tours, brochures and promotional contests.

Newsmaker special events are especially effective in reaching target audiences with the message. They are newsworthy by definition and include activities such as financial roadshows, awards ceremonies, trade conventions, celebrity appearances and open houses.

Now, the effort can be accelerated, even amplified by carefully selecting the most efficient GROUPS of tactics such as Internet communications, key podium presentations, top-level personal contacts or print or broadcast media. When these tools are used to communicate with each target audience, we want them to hit home!

Equally important to the success of the action program will

be the selection and perceived credibility of the actual spokespeople who deliver the messages. To achieve effective media coverage, they must speak with authority and conviction.

Now, it's time to monitor progress and look for signs of improvement. Public relations counsel and staff must speak regularly with members of each target audience, monitor print and broadcast media for evidence of the company's messages or viewpoints, and interact with key customers, prospects and influentials. And, if resources allow, include local market opinion polling.

At last, indicators that the messages are moving opinion in your direction will start appearing. Indicators like comments in community business meetings, mentions in research analyst's reports, local newspaper editorials, e-mails from members of target audiences as well as public references by political figures and local celebrities.

What is happening, is that the action program is beginning to gain and hold the kind of public understanding and acceptance that will lead to the desired shift in public behavior. Executed correctly – especially against the reality of plunging sales – we really ARE talking about nothing less than the organization's survival.

And the end-game? When the changes in behaviors become truly apparent through increased showroom traffic, media reports, thought-leader comment, employee and community chatter and a variety of other feedback – in other words, clearly meeting the original behavior modification goal – the public relations program can be deemed a success.

In the end, a sound strategy combined with effective tactics leads directly to the bottom line – altered perceptions, modified behaviors, a happy CEO and a public relations home run.

Thank you for listening today. I hope these remarks contain a nugget or two that assist you in better understanding the function of public relations in your organization. Especially how it can strengthen relationships with those important groups of people – those target audiences, those “publics” – whose perceptions and behaviors can help or hinder the achievement of your business objectives.

end

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