

How Public Relations Can Help Your Business

By Robert A. Kelly

How Public Relations Can Help Your Business

Robert A. Kelly
bobbkelly@TNI.net

none
none

Do you worry about certain behaviors among your most important audiences because those behaviors are crucial to achieving your organization's objectives? If your answer is yes, you need public relations.

The payoff? When those audiences do what you want them to do, achieving your organizational objectives gets a lot easier. That's why this article is all about how to make welcome, key-audience behavior a regular occurrence.

We learned long ago that people act on their own perceptions of the facts, leading to predictable behaviors about which something can be done. We call their cumulative perceptions opinion...public opinion.

Public relations tries to create, change or reinforce that opinion by reaching, persuading and moving-to-action the very people whose behaviors affect your organization.

That's why it's quality planning, and the degree of perception and behavioral change it produces, that defines the success or failure of a public relations program.

Those Painful Behaviors

Let's look at some of those crucial perceptions (usually leading to crucial behaviors) among target audiences that can make you nervous. If you labor for an association, it might be strong feedback that members perceive your communications organs as devoid of informative material. Or, for the regional manager with a motel chain, growing email traffic suggesting that guests perceive rooms as dirty would be unsettling. And for a brand manager, field reports that fast food taste tests result in less than complimentary consumer reactions might ruin his day.

Those kind of perceptions almost always lead to unhappy behaviors such as loud complaints about association communicators, cancelled reservations due to a motel chain's housekeeping mismanagement, or to falling sales because of a fast food product's poor taste.

What to do About Them

How can any organization prepare itself to prevent and deal effectively with such key-audience opinion challenges?

Let's start by walking through a perception challenge facing a typical organization. Because public relations problems are usually defined by what people THINK about a set of facts, as opposed to the actual truth of the matter, one would be well-advised to focus on three public relations realities:

1. People act on their perception of the facts;
2. Those perceptions lead to certain behaviors;
3. Something can be done about those perceptions and behaviors that leads to achieving the organization's objectives.

Awareness is Key

Those responsible for public relations in any organization – let's say it's you for purposes of this article -- must be constantly aware of counterproductive behaviors among the organization's key audiences – customers, prospects, community activists, union leaders, competitors and others.

Remaining alert to these potentially damaging perceptions and behaviors requires special vigilance. Among intelligence gathering techniques are regular monitoring of headquarters and field location media, staff activity reports, employee and community feedback, regulatory and other local, state and federal government activities involving your organization and, especially these days, the Internet with its emails, ezines, chatrooms and search engines.

What's the Problem?

First, identify the key operating problem. Is it declining sales in a specific product line or location? Is it an allegation of wrongdoing? Is it a quality or performance issue? Has an elected official spoken negatively about your industry? Have you learned that a national activist group may target a unit of your organization? Or, is there clear evidence of negative behaviors among your key audiences?

Verify, Verify, Verify

Yes, determine through field staff, key customers, media monitoring and, if resources allow, even opinion sampling, just how serious the problem is. If an allegation, is it true or false? If a drop-off in sales, gather and carefully evaluate the possible causes. If a quality issue, probe deeply for its probable or likely cause.

How Bad is it?

After an exhaustive review of all evidence surrounding the behavioral problem you have identified, establish conclusively the size and shape of the problem rating its damage potential on a scale between an irritation and an immediate emergency. Does it threaten employee or public safety, financial stability, reputation, the organization's mission, or sales? The answers to such assessments help determine the resources to be marshalled.

Worst Case?

Let's assume that probing opinion through personal contact and informal polling out in the market place, you determine that, in fact, there IS a negative perception among a key audience that the company's largest customer is about to switch suppliers which would seriously damage your company's operations. (In a non-profit, an equivalent perception and behavioral problem might involve allegations that its

administrative costs far exceed the normally accepted level, or that executive compensation is excessive).

Is it True?

Management quickly determines that, in fact, there is no truth whatsoever to the rumor of a loss of the company's largest customer.

The Public Relations Goal

Therefore, because the PERCEPTION of a key customer loss is now causing hiring problems (behavioral) within the company, and, outside via concerns among suppliers and the greater community and its leaders, you establish the public relations goal as follows:

Change negative public perception of the company's largest account longevity from negative to positive, thus correcting hiring and retention problems and calming supplier and community concerns.

The Public Relations Strategy

Now, you must select one of three choices available to you

when you determine the public relations strategy. In this example, you chose to CHANGE existing opinion rather than CREATE opinion where none exists, or REINFORCE an existing opinion, both of which not applicable to this case.

With your perception and behavior modification goals, and now the strategy, established, progress will be measured in terms of altered behaviors – namely, a satisfactory reduction in employee departures, an equally satisfactory increase in the company’s overall employee retention rate as well as reassured suppliers and communities-at-large. Such progress markers can be set down, and agreed upon, once the negative perceptions are truly understood, thus establishing the degree of behavioral change that realistically can be expected.

Who do we Talk to?

Identifying key audiences and prioritizing them – a crucial step in any public relations action planning – were identified early on in this example as employees, suppliers and the community-at-large and its leaders, in that priority order.

What do we Say?

Well, we prepare persuasive messages designed to disarm the rumor of a “large customer loss.” Bringing important target audiences around to one’s way of thinking depends heavily on the quality of the message prepared for each of them.

The messages must disarm the rumor with clear evidence such as a forthright pronouncement by the chief executive officer, and even a town meeting, should the discord reach high levels. It might be necessary to seek a credible third-party, public endorsement such as reassurance by the “large customer” himself, or herself, that “we have no intention of switching suppliers as long as the company continues to provide the same superior quality, service and pricing it now does.” Regular assessments of how opinion is currently running among employees, suppliers and community leaders should be performed. Finally, action-producing incentives for individuals to feel reassured should be identified and built into each message.

Those incentives might include the very strength of the “large customer’s” forthright position on the issue, possible plans for expansion that hold the promise of more jobs and taxes, or even sponsorship of new employee sporting events coverage on local cable channels.

It’s Tactics Time

Now, you select the most effective communications tactics available to you, and commence action.

How will your three target audiences – especially in various locations -- actually be reached? Choices include face-to-face meetings, email, hand-placed feature articles and broadcast appearances, special employee, supplier or community briefings, news releases, announcement luncheons, onsite media interviews, facility tours, promotional contests, brochures and a host of other carefully targeted communications tactics.

Special events are especially effective in reaching such audiences with the message. They are newsworthy by definition and, if sufficient locations are involved, include activities such as financial roadshows, awards ceremonies, trade conventions, celebrity appearances and open houses.

A Communications Bullseye

Your public relations effort can be accelerated, even amplified by carefully selecting the most efficient tactics among print or broadcast media, key podium presentations, special events or top-level personal contacts because, when these tools communicate with each target audience, they must score direct bullseyes.

Especially important to the success of any action program is the selection and perceived credibility of the actual spokespeople who deliver the messages. They must speak with authority and conviction if they are to be believed, and if meaningful media coverage is to be achieved.

How are we Doing?

Obviously, you'll want to monitor progress, seeking signs of improvement in not only employee hiring and retention levels, but in overall employee morale levels as well as those of the company's suppliers and communities-at-large.

You should speak regularly with members of each target audience, monitor print and broadcast media for clear evidence of the company's messages or viewpoints, and conduct a variety of ongoing interactions with key customers, prospects and plant location influentials.

Indicators that the messages are moving employee, supplier and community opinion in your organization's direction will start appearing. Indicators like comments in community meetings, local newspaper editorials, e-mails from suppliers as well as public references by political figures and local celebrities.

The End Game

By this time, your action program should begin to gain and hold the kind of employee, supplier and community understanding that leads to the desired shifts in behavior – namely, the unsettling rumor has been disarmed and operations return to a normal pace.

You know you've arrived at the public relations end game when the changes in behaviors become truly apparent through the increased pace of positive media reports, encouraging supplier and thought-leader comment, and increasingly upbeat employee and community chatter.

When you clearly meet the original behavior modification goal set when it all began, the public relations program can be deemed a success. Executed correctly – compared to doing little or nothing about the rumor -- we're talking about nothing less than the organization's ongoing health and, possibly, its survival.

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

end

Bob Kelly, public relations consultant, was director of public relations for Pepsi-Cola Co.; AGM-Public Relations, Texaco Inc.; VP-Public Relations, Olin Corp.; VP-Public Relations, 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>

[Get-Articles.com : 1000's of reprintable business and internet marketing-related articles.](#)

[Submit your article for reprint.](#)